

LENT 3, MARCH 15, 2020

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Lectionary Readings: Zechariah 5:5-11; Psalm 95:1-9; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; John 1:29-34

Sermon Title: *Who Will Take the Garbage Out?*

Prayer: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of [our] heart[s] be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, [our] Rock and [our] Redeemer.* (Psalm 19:14)

Salutation: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:2)

Text: The Word from God through which the Holy Spirit comes to stir our hearts for the Third Sunday in Lent is from our Old Testament Reading: Zechariah, chapter 5.

Introduction: Dear friends in Christ, who will take the garbage out? Has that question ever been asked in your family? Maybe you're the dutiful trash-taker-outer. However, what do you do if you've had enough of taking out the garbage? Are you faced with the painful, frustrating question: "*Who will take the garbage out?!*"

That would be an especially painful, upsetting question when the kitchen starts to stink to high heaven.

I. Zechariah feels the pain. Living in the Persian province of Yehud (roughly the kingdom of Judah) toward the end of the sixth century BC, the prophet was overwhelmed with mounds and mounds of spiritual garbage. We know what that looks and smells like too, don't we?

So, it sounds like Zechariah will need an industrial-sized vacuum! Someone must take the garbage out!

II. Who will take the spiritual garbage out? God will. How does He do it? Here in Zechariah, He appoints two women who have wings like storks, yes *storks*. And, "*They lifted up the basket between the heavens and the earth*" (v 9). But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

In this, the seventh of Zechariah's eight visions, the LORD's Messenger shows the prophet a basket – think of it as a garbage can. The prophet then raises his eyes and sees its lid lifted up, and surprise, there is a woman sitting inside.

Zechariah raises his eyes again – this is the only time in his eight visions that he looks up a second time. Why? Because this vision is the most complex. You think? Just then, the woman tries to get out, so the Messenger throws her back in and slams the lid shut.

But why do you think the Messenger is so quick to slam the lid of the garbage can shut on the woman? Remember, when the kitchen that stinks to high heaven because no one would take out the garbage. The stench spreads like wildfire!

And so, does sin. So, the Messenger, pushes the woman back in the garbage can! The point being though we have no authority over sin in our lives, the LORD's Messenger does. He prevails!

Then, Zechariah sees two more women with wings like a stork and this leads to these words: *"They lifted up the Basket between the heavens and the earth"* (v 9).

The stork-like-women take the container with the woman in it all the way to the land of Shinar. So, as we might have it, *"Operation Removal"* is in full swing

Ok, before we go any further, my hunch is that you might have a question, or two as to what's going on here:

- Let's begin with this one: *"Who is the Messenger?"* He is *"the LORD's Messenger,"* the pre-incarnate Christ. And note well, He has complete authority over the wicked woman. Remember? She tries to get out of the garbage can, but the Messenger slams the lid shut.
- Then, too: *"Not so fast,"* you say. *"Pre-incarnate Christ?"* Indeed! You see, before taking on flesh (incarnation) Jesus is present throughout the Old Testament – especially in the form of the LORD's Messenger.
- *"Ok, so who is the woman stuck in the flying garbage can?"* Zechariah calls her *"The Wickedness."* She stands for Babylonian idolatry.
- *"What does the vision mean?"* Idolatry is placed in the container and lifted up with stork wings. Storks are known for their strength and ability to go on long migrations. And so, this idolatry is returned to the land of Shinar which is the ancient name for Babylon. All this is to say – in very vivid detail – that God will take the garbage out.

Garbage, you see, is a good way to describe idolatry. Just think of the mess caused when we worship:

- Eros, the Greek mythological god of sexual pleasure.
- Dionysus, the Greek mythological god of wine and self-indulgence.
- Mammon, the god of wealth (money).
- Prometheus, the Greek mythological god of human power and achievement.
- Mars, the Roman mythological god of race and nation.

Sex, wealth, achievement and the like are not evil, in and of themselves. They are God-given gifts. But the temptation is:

- To take *good* things and worship them as if they are the *best* things.
- To take *valuable* things and turn them into *supreme* things.

Thus, our *affection* for them turns into *adoration*. And once anything or anyone other than Jesus occupies the innermost part of our hearts, we tell ourselves that we can't live without them. Then we break God's commandments, rationalize indiscretions, destroy relationships, and do significant harm to ourselves – just to get what we want.

Today is no different. We still find ourselves in the middle of a mess, rummaging through the toxic waste, trying to find that idol we weren't quite ready to part with.

III. Who will take *our* spiritual garbage out? God will, through His appointed means of grace, which in Zechariah's case are stork-like-women. Yet long before this vision, it was in God's heart to take away what is rotten and rancid, what stinks and smells.

You see, right in the middle of the Pentateuch (The Five Books of Moses – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy) stands the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16. There, when the high priest confessed Israel's sins upon Azazel – the *scapegoat* or in other words, the garbage-goat – who was then cast into the wilderness.

Standing in this same tradition, Jesus once sent demons into hogs – the ultimate unclean animal – and they rushed headlong into the Sea of Galilee (Mark 5:1-13). And one day He will throw the devil, the false prophet and the beast into the lake of fire and slam the lid shut. But we're getting ahead of ourselves – again.

You see in the fullness of time Jesus Christ – the LORD's Messenger in Zechariah's book – stepped out of the visions and into the garbage landfill on Golgotha. You see:

- Golgotha was filled with rotting flesh and the stench of death.
- Corpses hung there for days, sometimes weeks, often consumed by birds and animals.

It was there that a Roman soldier thrust his spear into the Savior's side:

- Not only to fulfill what Zechariah writes in 12:10: "*They will look upon Me Whom they have pierced.*"
- But also, Zechariah 13:1: "*On that day a fountain will be opened to cleanse people from sin and uncleanness.*"

This means that the fountain of baptismal water and Eucharistic blood (The Lord's Supper) is open wide and is a flowing river of life for you.

As we think of the LORD's Messenger taking the garbage out, Shel Silverstein famously writes (*"Where the Sidewalk Ends"*):

"Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout would not take the garbage out! She'd scour the pots and scrape the pans, candy the yams and spice the hams. And though her daddy would scream and shout, she would not take the garbage out. It piled up to the ceiling: coffee grounds and potato peelings; brown bananas, rotten peas, and chunks of sour cottage cheese. It filled the can, it covered the floor, it cracked the window, it blocked the door. With bacon rinds and chicken bones, drippy ends of ice cream cones. The garbage rolled down the hall, it raised the roof, it broke the wall. And finally Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout said, 'OK, I'll take the garbage out!' But then, of course, it was too late, the garbage reached across the state, from New York City to the Golden Gate."

But we're getting ahead of ourselves – again! Oh, yes, someday it will be too late, but not now, not here, not for us. you see, Zechariah's Basket, Messenger, wicked woman, lead lid and stork-like-women point us to this life-changing promise: *"He who had no sin became sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God"* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Conclusion: So, dear friends in Christ, why continue to sit in the stench? Well, remember the hymn we just sung: *"Just as I Am"* (LSB, #570). Particularly let's look at verses 2 and 5: *"Just as I am and waiting not To rid my soul of one dark blot, To Thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot, O Lamb of God, I come, I come." . . . Just as I am, Thou wilt receive, Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve; Because Thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come, I come."*

In the name of ✠ Jesus, Who forgives all your sins. Amen.

To God alone the Glory!