

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### Ephesians 1:15-23 *Reigning Compassion*

The Old Testament reading from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE prophet Ezekiel came after the fall of Jerusalem, the death of his beloved wife, and his long exile in Babylon. Ezekiel had lost all that he owned, lost his wife, his homeland, his temple, but received a calling from GOD that sustained him and a ministry to the Israelis in hard exile. The people of Israel had been taught that worship of GOD (Yahweh) was to be practiced only at the temple. The temple was no more and so GOD reached out to His people through Ezekiel.

Ezekiel has 3 very important messages for the Israelis 2600 years ago that are just as true today:

- 1) **God is with us** (even when we lose our possession, our family, our hope and our faith). The Israelis had lost all of these, how about us? Sometimes it can seem that we are all in some sort of "exile", cut off from our former lives, our former jobs, our former loved ones, sometimes from God. In Ezk 34 God says "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them and bring back the strays on the days of clouds and darkness". Sometimes it seems so very dark to us all, but Ezekiel tells us that God is with us.
- 2) **God will bind up our injured selves and strengthen us.** The Israelis had been brutalized, enslaved, and suffered in body and soul. Sometimes we are brutalized by life, enslaved by our sins,

and suffer also, but Ezekiel tells us that God is with us and will bind us up.

- 3) **God is our shepherd.** Ancient Near Eastern writings employ the term "shepherd" not to describe one who manages a herd of beasts, but rather a noble, caring parental figure who watches over His flock. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the writings of Micah (4:6) and of Jeremiah (23:3) echo the powerful beauty of this shepherd figure. Ezekiel reassures us that God in our shepherd, even in the dark night, the blowing wind, and the raging storm.

Ezekiel is speaking to us all, right now in the winter of 2008 when we are all feeling the chills of economic uncertainty, changing power structures, and loss of faith. His message is bright, sincere, carrying the word of God to our ears and the visions of our Shepherd who watches over us, right now and always. His proclaims how God will interrupt our lives in the hands of the earthly rulers to reverse their fallen ways and rescue his flock. **God will reveal the true and only reign, a reign of compassion for his flock.**

In the New Testament we see the hand of God at work in Paul's letter to the nascent church in Ephesus, as related to us in his letter to the Ephesians and in the Book of Acts. Paul's ministerial efforts had real ups and downs. Ephesus was both to Paul. His evangelism in the name of Jesus Christ was

enormously successful, but hardly without incident. His challenge to the Roman imperial powers in Ephesus stirred hot, often violent responses in the non-believers. Ephesus was not some small outpost, but rather a large cosmopolitan city of the age—one largely financed by a brisk business in tourist trappings at the Temple of their patron god Artemis. Paul was beaten, imprisoned, cut off from his nascent church. But let's look carefully at what he could offer to the Jesus followers in the early church to sustain them during their conflicts, fallings, and failing in faith.

Paul offers 3 powerful insights that his life in Christ Jesus has formed in him. His insights are penned some seven centuries after the prophetic words captured by Ezekiel, but look again at how they reach through almost 2 millennia to our lives here in 2008.

- 1) **God of our LORD Jesus Christ offers us the spirit of wisdom and revelation**, i.e., God opens our eyes. Now the word "eye" as employed by Paul has a rich texture. No so much a simple organ of vision, but divinely created sensor that "sees" through to the vision of God as mediated by Jesus Christ. It is not simple sight, but deep almost prophetic vision that God offers to us. Remarkably, it is not even the eye in our head of which Paul speaks, it the "eyes of our hearts".
- 2) **We need to develop spiritual insights in order to grasp the great truths of God.** So the "eyes of our hearts", does not refer to organs of vision found on our pumping hearts. The Greek term "καρδια" translates simply into "heart", but Paul makes use of the fullest, theological meaning of heart. Like the joy/pain that we feel when our hearts are open to those whom we love, embrace, separate from and sometimes lose. Saint Thomas Aquinas often pondered on the nature

of the "organ" through which we perceive and are touched by God. I doubt that it is the foot, the leg, the hand, or the liver. Sounds like the heart to me, our hearts are where we feel the joys and pains of life, of reflection, and of worship of God. Paul hopes that the "eyes of our heart" will be "**enlightened**" and finally we can see the "**glorious inheritance in the saints**" and the "**incomparable great power for us who believe**". Paul is offering to us the hope of God, but what proof does Paul give us to reassure us of the power of our God the good shepherd?

- 3) **God's mighty strength, which He exerted in Christ when he raised Him from the dead and seated him at His right hand in the heavenly realms.** This power, the power to resurrect Jesus, to overcome death once-and-for-all-of-our selves and sins, and to grasp through the love of Jesus our justification to an everlasting life, is that of which Paul tells us. Is this message for only the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jesus followers in Palestine? No, it is a true message for all of those who come to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, not only in the present age Paul tells us, but also in the one to come. Christ's supremacy over all, over good/evil, the weak/powerful, the saints/sinners, is absolute dominion. "**God placed all things under his feet and appointed Christ to be head over everything for the church, which is his body (Corpus Christi), the fullness of him who fills everything in every way**". God offers us hope, glorious hope, through Jesus, not only because He is a merciful and gracious God, but because through Jesus and through each of us He knows that we will suffer in our lives.

In what ways do we see the “incomparable great power” of God work in our lives? That’s a legitimate question with which to draw this sermon to a close. For me I have been blessed to know many ways in which this incomparable great power showers down on my life and the lives of others. That is not to say that in our lives we escape suffering, we do not. But Paul helps us to understand that greatest challenge of all, for all time, has already been overcome by the love of Jesus Christ. Our promise of Our Good Shepherd to his fallen sheep is operating 24/7/365 days a year and extends to no cosmic boundary. My friends, we have by granted eternal life through our faith. The power of God is at work in us all, every day, but we must open the “eyes of our hearts” to gain insight into God’s vision for us, humankind, and all of the Almighty’s creation.

I close with a Thanksgiving story, a story that goes back 10 years, and focuses upon a elderly woman in my former congregation. She was a wonderful woman, devoted spouse, and mother of four children. Her life spanned the Great Depression, World War 2, and included all the trials and tribulations of life including a severe bout with breast cancer that she survived. Thanksgiving was a most special holiday for her, having provided a family gathering for over 50 years in which she took great pleasure. When the breast cancer returned, with a vengeance, she found herself with 40 radiation treatments, chemotherapy, and the hope to find the strength to complete that tradition, one more time. God’s grace was with her, a devout Christian who blessed every new day, “come what may”, she welcomed her family to Thanksgiving in 1998, startling some with the appearance of a walker. The radiation treatments to the

spine itself had taken their toll and reduced her mobility. She gave grace and blessed the Lord for all that had been received by us all and personally in her life. Everyone enjoyed the holiday get-together. We were moved by the powerful faith of this Christian woman as she faced the joys and suffering of a life in Christ. She made Thanksgiving 1998, but not Christmas that year.....she had gone up ahead of us, all of us, including me her son.

Let us pray: