

For the sake of My Holy Name

Ezekiel 36.22-28, Luke 11.1-4

Continuing with our sermon series on the 'New normal' this month, using the biblical story of God returning the Israelites from exile in Babylon (and other nations) to their land, this week I want to share on not only what actions God promised to do to restore Israel to its land, but the motivation behind why He was going to act.

Can I encourage you to open your bible to Ezekiel 36.22-32, and as you, the question I want us to have at the back of our minds is; Why does God do what He does? What's the motivation for His plans, his purposes, actions?

For many of us, the first thing that will come to mind will be Love. That God does what he does primarily out of love. And although this is partly true, emphasized by texts like the famous John 3.16, I believe it's not the primary motivation for God's actions.

Our reading in Ezekiel and throughout scripture, we see a different reason why God does what He did for Israel and what He continues to do for us. And that is; For the sake of His Holy Name.

I grew up in a country and a culture where a name meant almost everything. A name has a meaning and a story behind it, names tell people which tribe you belong to, which languages you speak, which part of the country you are from, which lineage you are come from. And in my community growing up, it told people which family you belong to. Which is why, discipline was almost held above anything else, a lot of times even above religion and education. Because as a child I knew right from the beginning, if I misbehaved, especially away from home, I did not only bring shame to myself, I brought shame to my family and my families name (*not that it stopped me from mis behaving*). One of the questions asked when caught misbehaving was, "whose child is this?" And your family would most certainly be identified from the name. If a name can be this important to us as human beings, how important then can it be to God?

In the first talk in this series, we found out that the Israelites disobeyed God and brought dishonour to His name, hence the reason for exile. But even in exile, they did not necessarily glorify God, we are told that "they continued to profane His name, not just His name, but His 'Holy name.'" And as a result, the pagan nations where the Israelites had been exiled begun to view the God of the Israelites as being no different from any other gods. Worse still, to these pagan nations, it appeared that their gods were now even more powerful than the Lord, since in their eyes, the Lord was not able to protect His people from the enemy, and protect the land He had given them.

In Ezekiel 36.22-23, we find God promising to correct this thinking, promising to act, not because He loves His people (which he certainly does), but because He wants to vindicate the holiness of His great name. God wanted to demonstrate that He was and is the One True and Living God. V38 says, "...Then they will know that I am the Lord."

God wasn't promising to restore Israel to its former glory and even greater because of their righteousness, or because of anything good they had done, God doesn't do all He does for us because of our righteousness, or because of how good we are, God in His grace gives us what we do not deserve, for His name's sake.

God wants His name to be great, so that the nations may regard Him not as an ineffective tribal god, but as the Lord of the whole earth. And so God was going to vindicate His name not through Israel's suffering, but through her restoration. Israel was going to be the channel through which this vindication is going to be achieved.

In a series of prophetic statements, Ezekiel describes what God will do; In verses 24 through to 30 of Ezekiel 36, God spells out His actions to vindicate His Holiness. Note God says over and over 'I will'

*“For **I will** take you out of the nations; **I will** gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. **I will** sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; **I will** cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. **I will** give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; **I will** remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And **I will** put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and **I will be your God.** (NIV)*

In all of this, the covenant relationship between Israel and God will be renewed, and once again, God says, “you will be my people and I will be your God.”

These actions of God were not exactly intended to benefit His people, but to set forth His glory in the world. In Ezekiel and all over scripture we see that God acts, for the sake of His Holy name, especially among the nations.

Preparing this talk, I was reminded that all of life, all that God has given me, my family, my calling, my friends, my everything, is not for my benefit (as much as I might enjoy it), but ultimately it's for His glory, for the lifting up of his name.

When we fully understand this, it even changes the way we pray. In our second reading in Luke 11.1-4, when the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, He said to them, “when you pray, begin with: Father, hallowed be your name.....”

And when you understand the ultimate purpose of God, you also begin to pray exactly how Jesus taught us how to pray. This is what should drive all our praying; God, for the sake of your name, I pray for healing for so and so.. God, for the sake of your name, we ask that you will bless our mission partners... This is what drives our motivations, because it's what drives the motivation of God.

Conclusion

As the Israelites returned from exile into the promised land, they had a responsibility to represent God properly. As we move into the new normal, as Christ followers, we have a responsibility to represent God properly, in our actions and in our words, in our homes, schools, social circles, in our community, in Church! Let us seek to be renewed by the power of the Holy spirit to bring glory to His name in this new season we find ourselves in.

There is a constant refrain in Ezekiel that says, 'God is on the move.' And indeed in this new season, He is on the move and wanting to make his name known and glorified in all the nations, tribes, people, gathered communities, and He wants to use us for His glory, for His name's sake. The question I leave us with then is, how do we represent God to the world?