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Downbound Train

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you should like a title for this morning's sermon, I call it "Downbound Train." That's a phrase from a song by Bruce Springsteen back in 1984. There is something about this morning's First Lesson that has an air despondency about it...hopelessness and doom. It puts me in mind of the Springsteen song. In his song, it is as if the singer can't win. He is being blown away and just doesn't have a chance:

I had a job, I had a girl  
I had something going, mister, in this world  
I got laid off down at the lumber yard  
Our love went bad, times got hard  
Now I work down at the car wash  
Where all it ever does is rain  
Don't you feel like you're a rider on a downbound train

She just said, "Joe, I gotta go  
We had it once, we ain't got it anymore"  
She packed her bags, left me behind  
She bought a ticket on the Central Line  
Nights as I sleep, I hear that whistle whining  
I feel her kiss in the misty rain  
And I feel like I'm a rider on a downbound train

By the end of the song, the singer seems be a prisoner:

Now I swing a sledge hammer on a railroad gang  
Knocking down them cross ties, working in the rain  
Now, don't it feel like you're a rider on a downbound train

A similar feeling of hopelessness is sweeping away the Israelite exiles in today's First Lesson, from Ezekiel 33. They are on a downbound train, and they know that they are to blame.

Now, that's a significant difference from the Springsteen song. The Israelites know *they* are to blame. In the song, we have a working man who is being swept away by shifts in the economy he does not understand and is pretty helpless to contend against. But for the Israelites, they know that they themselves bear blame for their plight. Listen again to verse 10:

...‘Our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?’ (Ezekiel 33:10, RSV)

For the exiles to sigh such a lament takes a certain grace and marks a certain spiritual maturity in them. They have stopped self-deception and defensiveness and have acknowledged that they themselves are to blame for their sorry situation. The prophets had warned them that disaster was coming toward them because of their sins. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel had tried to alert them to the danger looming because of their sins. These two prophets — Jeremiah and Ezekiel — were extraordinary preachers. That age was blessed to have them — both of them. But that age had not heeded the prophets, with the resulting devastation of Jerusalem and the carrying away of the Israelite exiles into Babylon.

Now, those exiles, and probably the poor people languishing back in Judah too, are confessing that they themselves are to blame — that their sins and their transgressions have been their undoing. And now they wonder that profound question:

How then can we live? (Ezekiel 33:10, RSV)

It is the nature of time and of its relentless forward flow, that once a sin has been committed, it cannot be undone. It simply rests there in the past, forever a part of history. Sometimes we can manage to forget about our past transgressions, but not always. And they remain there in any case. Sometimes, with deep sorrow and regret, we are haunted by something we’ve done in the past. We wish we had never done it! But we did it, and there is no undoing it. So Israel wonders, “How then can we live? If we are driven into exile because of our transgressions, how are we going to live, because those transgressions simply sit there, unmovable. They won’t go away. Is there any way forward for us?”

Now we come to the dramatic point in this morning’s reading. It is certainly a highpoint in the whole Bible. It is the highpoint that speaks of forgiveness. The Lord instructs Ezekiel to say this to the poor exiles:

<sup>11</sup>Say to them, As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:11, RSV)

The Psalms teach the same high doctrine:

<sup>3</sup>If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? <sup>4</sup>But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. (Psalm 130:3-4, NRSV)

And I want you never to forget it:

...for with the LORD there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. (Psalm 130:7, KJV)

You might think that you have done something so bad that you have spoiled your life. You might think that there is no chance for a happy conscience for you again. But it is not so. Do not think such discouraging thoughts. Even if you are a prisoner on death row and time is running out and you believe that you are getting what you well deserve, nonetheless rejoice to think that with the Lord there is forgiveness, there is the real chance for your sins to be lost in the sea of God's forgetfulness, and there is the chance lying there before you of flying off to heaven forgiven of that which haunts you. Come to me or some other pastor for Private Confession and Absolution. And if you can't reach me or some other pastor, simply cry out, with your dying prayer if need be, that you have sinned and count on the Lord's forgiveness.

And why does the Lord forgive? Because of his love for us, even if we be terrible sinners desiring forgiveness. Let us take with complete faith the great words of the Lord recorded in this morning's reading:

As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live... (Ezekiel 33:11, RSV)

## **DOUBLE USE OF THE WORD "LIVE"**

One could almost tremble in noting here the double use of that word "live."

As *I live*, says the Lord GOD...[I desire] that the wicked turn from his way and *live*.

As it turns out, this is no mere piece of divine rhetoric. The Lord does not mean simply that he *really, really* desires the wicked to live. It is more than rhetoric. It is more along the lines of self-surrender — aye, self-surrender all the way to death. For, in the course of time, this God who speaks of his willingness to forgive the wicked, shall become incarnate of the Virgin Mary, will suffer and die on the cross to make sure that even the most awful criminal can nonetheless repent and live!

So, to the exiles sad question "How then can we live?" the Lord himself has an answer: We can live by repenting and by his forgiveness. The future is not closed

for us. We are not destined for damnation even though we have sinned. Today starts a new day and we can use this day for repentance and forgiveness.

## **SHAME ON THE PREACHER!**

In today's Bible readings, I think we can see two further consequences of this divine love that is open to forgiveness: (1) Shame on the preacher who does not call people to repentance. And (2) Just as God is willing to forgive, so should we be willing to forgive those who seek our forgiveness.

The first point, about shame on the preacher who does not call people to repentance, comes from our First Lesson, from Ezekiel 33. It is the Lord's words to the watchman. As I read them aloud, imagine how they sound to me or to any pastor to whom the Lord has entrusted souls:

<sup>7</sup>So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. <sup>8</sup>If I say to the wicked, O wicked man, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. <sup>9</sup>But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way; he shall die in his iniquity, but you will have saved your life. (Ezekiel 33:7, RSV)

These solemn words to the watchman are a natural consequence of the Lord's love for his people. If the Lord does not desire the death of the wicked but rather that they should turn from the wickedness and live, then it is inevitable that the Lord is going to place a high level of responsibility on those called to warn the people. For how is the sinner to repent if he does not know that he is sinning — if she does not know that she is sinning? The preacher has a key role to play in restoring the sinner to the Lord.

Now, some of you have been listening to my sermons for twenty-two years now, going on twenty-three. I suspect that you would not call me a hellfire and damnation kind of preacher. Is this good? I am not sure. Above all, I have wanted to lift up the kindness of God in raising Jesus from the dead, because Jesus is such a good man and it gives such hope to us to know that we are in his hands. On the other hand, given everything we know about Jesus from the Bible, he is a man of high moral character and he requires that of us too. At least I hope I have accomplished this much in my preaching: I hope I have never betrayed the holy law of God. I might not have preached it in a hellfire and damnation kind of way. And yet, I hope I have left you with the sense that God's law is important and that the traditional moral teaching of the church is important.

## **FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER**

My other theme comes from this morning's Gospel Lesson: Just as the Lord is open to forgiving our sins, so we should be open to forgiving one another. In fact, in this morning's lesson, Jesus lays down a definite sequence of steps to go through when we have been hurt by a brother or sister in the church. The goal of this sequence is to maintain the reputation of both parties as far as the truth permits. So, we are to go to our brother or sister in the Lord in private and try to sort things out.

And I think it is in harmony with this procedure, and called for in other parts of the Gospel story, that when someone asks us to forgive them, we ought to do so. If we sense sorrow for sin in them and a true desire to do better going forward, we should forgive:

<sup>21</sup>Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?

<sup>22</sup>Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. (Matthew 18:21-22, KJV)

That is, we should mirror in our own lives, as far as lies possible with us, the love of God that desires not the death of sinners, but that they should turn from their sins and live, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.