

Ezekiel 37:15-28¹
The LORD sanctifies
& brings back his people
2nd Last Sunday of Reformation & Endtime –
Sunday of Saints Triumphant
Supplementary Lectionary Series
“A,” Old Testament

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Potluck
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Elders

¹⁵ The Word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁶ “Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, ‘Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him.’ Then take another stick of wood, and write on it, ‘Ephraim’s stick, belonging to Joseph and all the House of Israel associated with him.’ ¹⁷ Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand.

¹⁸ “When your countrymen ask you, ‘Will you not tell us what you mean by this?’ ¹⁹ say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am going to take the stick of Joseph—which is in Ephraim’s hand—and of the Israelite tribes associated with him, and join it to Judah’s stick, making them a single stick of wood, and they will become One in my hand.’ ²⁰ Hold before their eyes the sticks on which you have written ²¹ and say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. ²² I will make them One Nation in the land, on the Mountains of Israel. There will be One King over all of them, and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. ²³ They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

²⁴ “My Servant David will be King over them, and they will all have One Shepherd. They will follow my Laws and be careful to keep my Decrees. ²⁵ They will live in the land I gave to my Servant Jacob, the land where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children’s children will live there forever, and David my Servant will be their Prince forever. ²⁶ I will make a Covenant of Peace with them; it will be an Everlasting Covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my Sanctuary among them forever. ²⁷ My Dwelling Place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. ²⁸ Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my Sanctuary is among them forever.”

THE SOVEREIGN LORD UNITES HIS PEOPLE
I. ONE ISRAEL
II. ONE KING
III. ONE GOD

¹ *The New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984. All Scripture references are taken from this translation unless noted otherwise.

In the Name of Jesus who unites his Church into One, Dear Fellow-Redeemed,

Our text this morning speaks of the unity of those who believe in Jesus. This unity is reflected in the name of the Church: The Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints. You can hear that word “unity” in the word “communion”: common union. This Holy Christian Church, Communion of Saints, is composed only of those who believe in Jesus. This common union cuts across denominational lines. It is a union only of those who believe in Jesus alone as their Savior. Such a union is possible only by the work of God, for it is God the Holy Spirit who creates and sustains faith in Jesus in the heart through the Gospel in Word and Sacraments – Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Thus, as our text proclaims, THE SOVEREIGN LORD UNITES HIS PEOPLE. THE SOVEREIGN LORD UNITES HIS PEOPLE ... I. ONE ISRAEL; II. ONE KING; III. ONE GOD.

THE SOVEREIGN LORD UNITES HIS PEOPLE
I. ONE ISRAEL

At the end of the reign of King Solomon, Israel became a divided kingdom. The LORD brought this about because of King Solomon’s unfaithfulness.

⁶ Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely.... ¹¹ So the LORD said to Solomon, “Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my Covenant and my Decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the Kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. ¹² Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son. ¹³ Yet I will not tear the whole Kingdom from him, but will give him One Tribe for the sake of David my Servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen” (1 Kings 11:6; 11-13).

This happened with the accession to the throne of Solomon’s son, Rehoboam.

When Rehoboam became King in place of his father Solomon, he refused to listen to the wise counsel of the elders. The result was that the people revolted. Under the leadership of Jeroboam I, the people formed a new nation, a Northern Kingdom, known as Israel. Only the Southern Kingdom of Judah remained for Rehoboam and his successors to govern.

So there were two Kingdoms: The Kingdom of Israel to the north and the Kingdom of Judah to the south. The Northern Kingdom of Israel, beginning with Jeroboam I as King, had one wicked king after another. You might recall that King Ahab of that Northern Kingdom was the worst of them. Concerning King Ahab, the LORD said,

²⁵ There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. ²⁶ He behaved in

the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel (1 Kings 21:25,26).

It was a slightly different story regarding the kings of the Southern Kingdom.

There was a mixture of kings of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Some were godly, others were not. The LORD revealed his grace to the Southern Kingdom of Judah, because through it, he would preserve his promise to send the Messiah, the Christ, into the world. Through his Prophet Ezekiel, the LORD pointed ahead to that time when the Southern Kingdom and the Northern Kingdom would again be united as One. In order to make this promise of a United Kingdom clear to the Israelites who were presently in the Babylonian captivity with the Prophet Ezekiel, the LORD directed his Prophet to teach them by means of an object lesson.

The LORD directed Ezekiel to take two sticks. On one stick, Ezekiel was to write, “Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him” (37:16a); that was the Southern Kingdom. On another stick, Ezekiel was to write, “Ephraim’s stick, belonging to Joseph and all the House of Israel associated with him” (37:16b); that stick represented the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Then Ezekiel was to join the two sticks together – Israel and Judah, the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom would be One Israel.

Ezekiel was to explain to the Jews in exile with him in Babylon, that there would be a time in the future when the two Kingdoms would be joined. There would no longer be two Kingdoms but only One Kingdom. The inhabitants of this One Kingdom would be brought from all the nations where the Israelites had been scattered – exiled. Moreover, from the description of other elements of this promise, this One Kingdom of Israel would endure forever.

APPROPRIATION

The One Kingdom of Israel about which the LORD was speaking through his Prophet Ezekiel would not be a visible earthly Kingdom. Those religious denominations that urge support for today’s nation of Israel in the Middle East, confuse God’s promise of a heavenly Kingdom with that of an earthly kingdom. Chiliasts or Millennialists, think that texts like this from Ezekiel are promising to set up an earthly kingdom over which Christ will reign for a thousand years. Those of the Jewish faith expect such an earthly kingdom to be set up – a kingdom that will be a worldly superpower that will dominate the entire earth. But the One Israel, the One Kingdom of Israel, about which God is speaking through Ezekiel is the Kingdom of Israel of believers in Jesus, which we know and confess as “the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints.”

The One Kingdom the One Israel that God sets up is the Israel of believers in Jesus. These believers come from all ethnic origins – not just Jews. St. Paul is speaking about this in his Epistle to the Romans when he refers to the Old Testament believer, Abraham.

St. Paul states that Abraham is “the father of all who believe” – all who believe in Jesus (Romans 4:11b) – regardless of whether they are Jews or Gentiles. Similarly, St. Paul states, “Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel” (Romans 9:6b). Those who believe in Jesus are the true Israel. St. Paul also wrote to the Galatians,

⁷ Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. ⁸ The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the Gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” ⁹ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:7-9).

Believers in Jesus are the One Israel of which God is speaking in this prophecy of Ezekiel. That means that you, by faith alone in Jesus, are part of this One Israel.

You are part of this One Israel by faith alone in Jesus. That faith in Jesus has been created in your heart through the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. Through Holy Baptism, you were born again into the family of this One Israel. Through Holy Communion, your faith in Jesus is strengthened so that you remain in this One Israel. Through the Gospel or Good News of Jesus in the Word – that Jesus gave his holy and perfect life as the sacrifice of Atonement for the sins of the world – through that Gospel, you have forgiveness of sins and eternal life in heaven as part of this One Israel. All of this is yours through Jesus, your Savior, your Redeemer, and your King.

THE SOVEREIGN LORD UNITES HIS PEOPLE II. ONE KING

Through his Prophet Ezekiel, the LORD speaks not only of One United Kingdom – One Israel – but also of One King, who would be over this One Kingdom of Israel forever. The LORD says, “There will be One King over all of them, and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms” (37:22b). The LORD further identifies who this One King will be. He says, “My Servant David will be King over them, and they will all have One Shepherd.... David my Servant will be their Prince forever” (37:24a25c). Notice the names associated with this One Ruler: David, King, Shepherd and Prince. Moreover, this Ruler will rule “forever.” The only One who qualifies as this Ruler is Christ Jesus our LORD and Savior.

Recall that during his earthly public ministry, Jesus was often properly referred to as “The Son of David” – the descendant of David (cf. Matthew 1:1; 9:27; 15:22; 20:30,32; 21:9,15; Mark 10:47,48; Luke 18:38,39). In the opening verses of his Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul refers to Jesus in these words, “who as to his human nature was a descendant of David” (Romans 1:3). Jesus is this “David” about whom Ezekiel is prophesying. In addition, Jesus is the Shepherd.

During Old Testament times, kings were to be shepherds for the benefit of the people they ruled. Because of sin, these kings too often were self-seeking tyrants. But the Old Testament pointed to a Shepherd-King who would care for God's people. David pointed to this specifically, when, in Psalm 23, he said, "The LORD is my Shepherd" (Psalm 23:1). Jesus referred to himself as this Shepherd.

Jesus said,

"I am the Good Shepherd ... I lay down my life for the sheep.... I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again" (John 10:14a,15b,17b,18).

Jesus is the Shepherd-King to whom the Old Testament Scriptures pointed. In addition, Jesus is the Prince.

Jesus is the Prince referred to in our text. The Prince stands to inherit the Kingdom of his Father. Jesus told his disciples, "I confer on you a Kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me" (Luke 22:29). Moreover, Jesus, this Ruler, Prince, Shepherd, King reigns forever.

Ezekiel prophesies, "David my Servant will be their Prince forever" (37:25c). These words cannot refer to an earthly king, for earthly kings do not rule and reign "forever." These words refer to Jesus. The Angel Gabriel announced to the virgin Mary,

³⁰ ... "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will be with Child and give birth to a Son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The LORD God will give him the Throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the House of Jacob forever; his Kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:30-33).

Neither Jesus' Kingdom nor Jesus himself will ever come to an end. Jesus is King, Shepherd, Son of David and Prince.

APPROPRIATION

Jesus is your King, Shepherd and Prince. By faith in him, Jesus is your Savior and Redeemer. Jesus is your King.

Kings have rule and authority. Jesus told his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18b). The Apostle Paul refers to Jesus whom God

²⁰ ... raised ... from the dead and seated ... at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present

age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the Church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Ephesians 1:20-23).

The writer to the Hebrews states that God appointed his Son to be ...

² ... Heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful Word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the Right Hand of the Majesty in Heaven (Hebrews 1:2b,3).

Jesus is your King, for he rules, guides, controls and directs all things in heaven and on earth for your benefit – for the benefit of all who believe in him as their Savior – for your benefit. Thus, St. Paul concludes, “We know that all things work together for God for those who love God” (Romans 8:28). When St. Paul refers to “those who love God,” he is referring to believers in Jesus. The fact that Jesus is also a human being, is also for your benefit.

Jesus is the Son of David – a descendant of King David of the Old Testament, and, therefore, a human being. That means that Jesus understands your trials and tribulations, your troubles, turmoils, and temptations. The writer to the Hebrews states concerning Jesus: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have One who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). That “One who has been tempted in every way, just as we are” is Jesus. Jesus knows your every weakness. Jesus sympathizes with your tears and comforts you with his Word. Jesus is also your Good Shepherd.

You heard earlier why Jesus is your Good Shepherd. He laid down his life for you and took back his life again for you. Jesus laid down his holy and perfect life as the sacrifice of atonement for your sins. The fact that Jesus took back again his life from the tomb assures you that all your sins have been forgiven. This forgiveness of sins is absolutely necessary for you in order for you have to One God.

THE SOVEREIGN LORD UNITES HIS PEOPLE III. ONE GOD

Through the Prophet Ezekiel, the Sovereign LORD says twice, “They will be my people, and I will be their God” (37:23b); and, “I will be their God, and they will be my people” (37:27b). But the only way in which anyone can be “people of God” is if they have no sin. God is a holy, perfect and righteous God. No one who is sinful, no one who has on them or in them any taint of sin, can come into his presence. So that this New Israel of believers can come into God's presence, God removes their sin.

The Sovereign LORD says through his Prophet Ezekiel, “They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God” (37:23). When God refers to the vileness and defilement of people, he is using the picture of people covered with excrement – with human excrement. God would cleanse them from this sinful filth, so that they could come into his presence as his holy people. This cleansing takes place through Jesus.

The Apostle John writes in his First Epistle, “The blood of Jesus, [God’s] Son, purifies [or, cleanses] us from all sin” (1 John 1:7b). John pictures this cleansing as he recorded in the Book of Revelation. When John sees a great host arrayed in white, one of the elders in John’s vision explains: “These are they who are coming out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14b). Through the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (cf. John 1:29b,36b), God’s people are cleansed; and God makes with them his everlasting Covenant of Peace (37:26).

Thus, believers in Jesus are united together as One by this Sovereign LORD – by this Only True God – the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (cf. Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14). The Father created them, preserved, provided and protected them. The Son, redeemed them with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death on the cross. The Holy Spirit sanctified them – he called them to faith and kept them in faith through the Means of Grace – the Gospel in Word and Sacraments.

APPROPRIATION

The Sovereign LORD has cleansed you from your defilement – from your sins. Your sins of sexual immorality – adulteries, fornications, homosexuality – in thoughts, words, actions, behavior and attitude – you have been cleansed of your sins by Jesus’ blood. Your sins of idolatry – making the things of this life – possessions, pleasures, prestige, power, money – giving such things higher priority – those sins have been cleansed by Jesus’ blood. Your sins of over-indulgence in food and drink, in laziness and irresponsibility – have been cleansed from you by Jesus’ blood. Do not live in those things from which Jesus’ blood has cleansed you. Rather, look forward to the fulfillment of that about which David speaks in Psalm 16, that God the LORD “will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand” (Psalm 16:11b,c).

CONCLUSION

The unity of the “Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints,” of all believers in Jesus alone as their Savior – that unity is invisible now. In eternity, that unity will be a visible reality. Only believers in Jesus will participate in that eternal unity of the saints in heaven – all believers in Jesus. Therefore, continue in the Gospel in Word and Sacraments, which brings you to faith and keeps you in faith in Jesus as your Savior. Through that

faith, you will participate in heaven as God's One People with One King, Jesus, forever.
Amen.