

Two years ago this month I watched the Kansas City Royals play a few games of spring training the first year at their new facility. Those of you who can't remember many of the Royals players will be comforted to know there's a very good reason for that. Our players are not real memorable. Last year they played 162 baseball games and lost 104 of them. But two years ago when I watched the Royals take the field in spring training I couldn't believe my eyes. It was like someone had kidnapped our team, stolen their uniforms, put them on some guys who knew how to play baseball and sent them into the field. I sat in the bleachers and wondered out loud to friend and stranger alike, "Who are these guys?" That month they won more games than any other team, and when the season started, they won their first 9 games in a row. That year they had confidence; they had an interior spirit they hadn't known before.

Lent is our spring training. Lent is our time to perform the drills that make us good Christians. Each year the church gives us this season so that when Easter comes, people will look at us and wonder, "Who are these guys? They can't be the same Christians we knew before. They have confidence in what they believe. They have a new interior spirit."

This is what God wanted of Israel years ago, as we hear tonight in Ezekiel. God says, "I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts." You might think God was doing this as a favor to Israel, but that's not so. God says, "Not for your sakes do I act, house of Israel, but for the sake of my holy name." At the time, Israel had abandoned the covenant and turned to false gods. God had punished them, scattering and deporting them to other nations. Then God learned this punishment was going nowhere, because the other nations said, "These are the people of the LORD, yet they had to leave their land." When these other nations saw God punishing Israel, they thought less of God. So God changed Israel's heart. "The nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord."

Whenever our fortunes improve, we often think God wanted to make us happier. But usually God has something bigger in mind. God blesses us so that others will realize how great God is, not how great we are.

This evening we celebrate baptism with four people from two families – a mother and her daughter, a father and his son. It's an exciting night for these individuals and their families. But God isn't doing this for your sakes alone. God probably has something bigger in mind. God is hoping you will tell the world about your blessings and the source from which they come.

My brothers and sisters, all of us have come through this Lent, the spring training of our lives, ready to greet the new season of Easter. If we go forth from this church tonight changed, it's because God has something big in mind. God wants to change our stony hearts to natural hearts, to bring peace where there is strife, love where there is neglect, and hope where there is despair. God wants us to tell the world that Jesus is risen.