

Go Swimming While in Exile

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Date: 12 November 2023

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[0:00] So I'm going to be really, really honest, and you may have sensed this as I just did those announcements. Pastor Anthony was supposed to preach today. He was supposed to get us started in this sermon series talking about mammon and resources and stewardship.

And Claire did a really good job of getting us started along that vein in her prayer. But yesterday he wasn't feeling all that great. And in the evening he let me know that he wouldn't be able to preach. So what I'm about to do is stand up here and do what preachers call a 5 a.m. sermon. Those do exist, okay? We'll see how this goes.

So it's when you've had a crazy week and your thoughts don't come together until Sunday morning. Or when you have this really great sermon prepared, you think it's good, and then you sense like, nope, wrong sermon, you've got to start over on Sunday morning.

It's a 5 a.m. sermon. So I do want to say that if you think to yourself, you go to dinner and you're like, I really got that one point? But that other thing, I didn't know what she was talking about.

[1:08] I need you to do what they used to say in the churches I went to. Touch your neighbor and say 5 a.m. sermon, okay? I need all the grace today, all right? All the grace. But I do feel like the Lord is faithful to provide for her people, and so I ask for your prayers.

This past week, I was listening to a devotional podcast that I like. It's called Pray As You Go, and it led me somewhat unexpectedly to Ezekiel 47.

And I found myself like really lingering over that text. And this morning, I remember that I once wrote a sermon on Ezekiel 47, and it was terrible.

It was a terrible sermon. I was a guest preacher in New York, and I could see in the eyes of those people that they wanted to be set free. Seriously. Seriously. But this evening, I want to go back to that lingering sensation that I had this week regarding this passage.

And I want to try to remix that really terrible sermon to hear how God might speak to us. So if you are willing, please do pray with me.

[2:16] God. God. Creator God.

Loving God. Mother who has our names written in the palm of your hands. I do not have what I need, and yet you always provide.

Lord, we come into this space with all kinds of needs. Some of us are riding on highs. Some of us are unraveling.

And yet you are here in this place, and we worship you as the waymaker, as the one who is our firm foundation. So I just pray that we would experience your presence and move deeper into your healing this evening.

Lord, may we leave this place more deeply rooted and with a more felt sense of your love than when we came in.

[3:29] In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. All right. So what I want you to do tonight is to come with me on a journey exploring the prophet Ezekiel's vision of a sacred river flowing from the temple of God.

I want you to enter into this imaginary landscape that Ezekiel felt was more real than his lived reality. Such landscapes are at home in the literature and major religions of the world.

The Saraswati River is sacred to Hindus, Mount Kaf to Muslims, and Mount Maru to Buddhists. Yet none of those landscapes can be found on a map.

They all speak to a vision inside the human heart. They speak to a longing for something that is beyond ourselves.

They make us aware that some places are approachable only by way of deep need, serendipity, and grace. As one of my favorite writers puts it, Belden Lane.

[4 : 38] He goes on to say that artfully imagining non-existent realms expresses a yearning for the kingdom of God.

We keep telling stories with the hope that ultimately we'll be able to live our way into them. That's why we all love tales that give form to a world that is not yet here, he says.

Now, a few weeks back, I think it was maybe three weeks ago, I was reminded of that world which is not yet here when I asked you all during communion to write reflections of what you hope for the next 10 years of this church's life.

And this morning I pulled these out and Anthony and I have been looking at these, the elders are going to look at these. And I just pulled out a few that I thought were captured, some of what even some of the others said.

And I took pictures of them this morning and just, you'll see in the background of these, it's an artwork, a piece of art, one of our family friends Sharon did. So here's a couple of the things you wrote.

[5 : 51] Next 10 years of life at the table. Someone else said, Someone else said, Someone else said, All who are hungry feast.

And I love the dinner plate. A continued safe space for radical healing and justice. To become a place for LGBTQI plus people to become leaders nationwide.

Ten more years of providing a home for the homeless and a family for the orphan. A place where justice flows like a river and liberation reigns from heaven.

Where all are loved for who they are. Another one. Wrote this quote. If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time.

But if you have come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together. That's Lilla Watson.

[7 : 06] And then they wrote around the side, intentionally practicing liberation into being together. I think it says into being together. And then one more that I loved because it was so graphic.

Christ is in the middle. And then around it, you have justice. Political engagement. Intentional community. Service. Recognition.

And then at the end, just the word radical. So these are just a few of the visions of your hearts. And these are just a few of the longings that are just beyond us.

These represent destinations and landscapes that I think too often feel mythic. And which are only approached by way of, again, deep need, serendipity, and grace.

So what we're going to do is read Ezekiel 47, 1 through 12, which is about this sacred river, this mythic vision. A vision of the human heart, but also a vision of God's longing and heart.

[8 : 17] And as we do so, I hope that it will immediately conjure up images for you, potentially, of another landscape that often calls out to us. The Garden of Eden. So this is Ezekiel 47, 1 through 12.

Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple. There, water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east, for the temple faced east.

And the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate. And led me around on the outside of the outer gate that faces toward the east.

And the water was coming out on the south side. Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured 1,000 cubits and then led me through the water.

And it was ankle deep. Again, he measured 1,000 and led me through the water. And it was knee deep. Again, he measured 1,000 and led me through the water.

[9 : 27] And it was up to the waist. Again, he measured 1,000. It was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen. It was deep enough to swim in.

A river that could not be crossed. He said to me, mortal, have you seen this? Then he led me back along the bank of the river.

As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on one side and on the other. He said to me, this water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah.

And when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live. And there will be many fish once these waters reach there.

It will become fresh. And everything will live where the river goes. People will stand fishing beside the sea from In-Gedi to In-Eglame.

[10 : 29] It will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of a great many kinds like the fish of the great sea. But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh.

They are to be left for salt. On the banks of both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fall, but they will bear fresh fruit every month. Because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing. So in this passage, the prophet Ezekiel sees a vision of a river flowing from the temple. He's led through the vision by a sort of cosmic guide and an angel maybe, or perhaps even God, God's self. Ezekiel sees water trickling under a door and flowing out from the temple's inner court. The place of God's most concentrated presence. The Hebrew word here, I know it's an English teacher thing, but the Hebrew word here that's used for flowing is onomatopoeia.

[11 : 45] I know you never would hear that word again after you left high school. But it's onomatopoeia because you are meant to hear water being poured from the narrow neck of a bottle.

I have a water bottle, exhibit A, that I fill most mornings. Usually when I'm running out the door, often late. And one of the last things I do before I leave the house is I put that water bottle up against the refrigerator in my kitchen.

I press the water against the lever and I wait while a tiny stream of water fills that bottle. And because the water is filtered, and my refrigerator is maybe not the greatest, it takes a long time for that water to trickle into my bottle.

I'm usually pretty impatient while I listen to it, but I think that that is the sound that the prophet has in mind. Maybe you know that sound too. It's just a tiny bit of water and it's barely enough to notice. So then as this cosmic guide leads Ezekiel outside, the trickle starts to grow. As they move, the guide measures the water every thousand feet. At first, the water is ankle deep, then knee deep, and then up to Ezekiel's waist.

[13 : 04] And then it's so deep that Ezekiel needs to start swimming. And not only has this water gotten deeper, but it has gotten wider. And I have to admit that this part of this vision is something that often makes me nervous.

I cannot swim. I have tried many times. I have tried many times. And the idea of starting out in water, which is safe and calm and then becomes too deep to stand in.

It's pretty scary. It's a pretty scary image when you really think about it. But it's a spiritual vision that has these implications. And I wonder if all of us, whether you are an expert swimmer or you're like me and you need like floaties, are more scared of this part of following God and floating in this river than we would like to admit.

That part where our feet no longer touch the bottom, the part where the current, I like to think of this as the spirit, the current is in control, the part where it feels like we are risking death.

And sometimes we can name what's dying, but sometimes we can't. And yet this is exactly the kind of imaginary vision that teaches us what real life is all about.

[14 : 34] Then next to the vision, Ezekiel is somehow led to the river's bank and he sees these lush trees on the right and on the left. The guide tells him the river continues to the Dead Sea and that it heals all the waters found there.

The life of the sea will flourish. Everything will live where the river goes. The new waters, in these new waters, there are diverse fish.

The fruit trees are always in season, producing fruit not once a year but once a month. And the leaves for the trees are medicinal. They cure, they cure the sicknesses, they cure the sicknesses of the world.

In Ezekiel's vision, all of life is healed because of the water that flows from the sanctuary. In this vision, the presence of God and the place of the worshipping community, the temple, that is what brings life to every part of creation.

What is so interesting to me, what is so electric, is where the water goes.

[15 : 44] It goes to the Dead Sea, which is toxic to all sea life except the smallest bacteria and fungi. It goes to the shores, which forms the lowest point in the world.

It goes to the hypersaline lake, which is the deepest part of the earth. The waters in God's river move to the most depressed areas possible.

Not only does flowing in God's river mean that our feet won't touch the bottom, but that means risk and loss of control, but it means being swept to the places considered the lowest.

And some of those places are inside of us. And some of those places are outside of us. And then consider that Ezekiel is likely writing down the vision from inside a refugee camp near the Kippur River.

He was a priest by vocation and would have been one of the first people taken into exile during the Babylonian exile. So much of the Hebrew Bible is an attempt by those taken captive and exiled to understand their own trauma and to make sense of how God can be good in the midst of that trauma.

[17 : 00] And if you go back and you read the rest of this book, the book of Ezekiel, you'll see even that Ezekiel struggles with speaking, struggles with speech for the entire book because he is so traumatized.

I can't help but think that it means something that Ezekiel's vision of the river of God comes during his exile. I can't get over that it comes out of this place of trauma.

That's the place from which Ezekiel envisions himself swimming in the currents of God, which flow to the lowest places. When I look at this vision, I'm reminded of the different ways each of us in this room might feel in exile.

Now let me be clear, super clear about this, right? Like Ezekiel is in actual exile, okay? Actual exile that most of us probably have never experienced and never will.

And yet I still think it's important to dive into this even as a metaphor. So most of us want to experience this kind of immediate collective trauma.

[18 : 14] But I know that we might feel this sense of being disoriented, under siege, or abandoned. And maybe the version of that that you feel is about ability, disability.

It's about race or class or gender or sexual orientation. Maybe it relates to your sense of group oppression. Or maybe the version of this for you is most clearly related to something else.

Maybe it's a sense of being exiled from the church. I don't think, I think it's one of the most interesting parts of this passage that I don't think is an accident, is the part where the guide says to Ezekiel, mortal, have you seen this?

Because earlier in the book, Ezekiel is asked that exact same question. But what he's asked to look at is actually the ways in which the temple, at least from his perspective, had become corrupt.

And now Ezekiel again is being asked to mark the spot to remember this vision that the gathered community of worshipers can again become an experience of life.

[19 : 32] Can, in fact, bring healing and nourishment to those who are inside the river and outside of it. So what does this mean for us to grab onto this vision, especially if we're those who have been thrust out from the church?

What does it mean for our church to grab onto that vision? But I also want to just note one more thing about this. I think that there's a way in which this vision can be even more personal.

Maybe when you read this, you relate to being, to Ezekiel, who was bound and rendered mute right after his call experience. That's when others took away his ability to speak.

Or maybe you connect to the emotions Ezekiel must have felt when his wife dies in chapter 24 because you know what it's like to lose someone extremely close.

Or maybe you even relate to the utter personal devastation of Ezekiel, who was a priest by vocation and everything on which he has based his life is now scattered in ruins.

[20 : 50] If we have never felt that, we probably will. So what does that vision mean in our community?

How do we hear this water trickling under the door and heed this call to swim in the current? Even in places that feel death dealing.

So I don't know all the answers to these questions. I wish I did. But I do see this imaginary landscape as a calling that I want to always keep before our community.

And I can only point out that Ezekiel's vision is deeply wrapped up in his sense that God is present and that God is leading him.

And that's good news. That's good news that leads us to deeper depth and deeper commitment along our spiritual journeys.

[21 : 54] That's good news that allows us to release control and follow God. God is present. Desires to nourish us.

And sometimes I wish we talked more about this part. Desires to be an agent of healing in our lives, particularly when we think about our own backgrounds and the things that we need to release. Now, one pivot. In your chairs, you have these purple serve cards. Every Sunday, second Sunday, we put them out. Because we're asking you to deepen your commitment here.

And this week, I specifically need to ask if some of you will be willing to serve on worship production. Woo! Okay. The people who run the Sunday slides and help with the live stream. And as we're opening a new service, if some of you would volunteer for first impressions to greet folks. What was coming up in me this morning as I was sitting was there's this desire to be really honest that this is a season in which I sense, maybe that's too strong or religious of a term, but I feel like it's a time of greater commitment.

[23 : 12] For some of you, to this community. Next week, we're going to start this series on money and, you know, the dreams and desires of our church.

And I'm going to ask you to invest in us. And I've been spending mornings this past few weeks basically asking, this is actually true. I often think to myself, Lord, I need the confidence of an Atlanta preacher asking for a second jet.

That is what I need. I'm not going to spend it on a second jet. I don't have a first jet. But, like, I want that kind of confidence because we're talking about this river that brings healing and life.

So, I'm going to close with one more story. And this is just the story of one of my heroes that comes up for me whenever I read the story of Ezekiel.

No surprise, y'all. It's of Harriet Tubman. Harriet Tubman was born into slavery in Maryland in the 1880s. She escaped to Philadelphia in 1849.

[24 : 17] But when she heard that her niece was being sold, she went back and decided to steal her to freedom. And that's what led her to all these trips on the Underground Railroad.

When I think about Harriet Tubman hiding enslaved people in the woods or helping them cross a stream, I can only imagine her. I mean, when I say that, I mean it. I cannot imagine her discomfort and disorientation and fear.

But what grabs me about this story was her own personal physical state. When she was a girl, an overseer threw a two-pound weight at her and hit her in the head.

And for the rest of her life, she struggled with headaches and seizures. But what's stunning is that she herself believed that her injuries were responsible for what she considered vision states.

For me, Tubman's story embodies what it means to go swimming while in exile. To grasp Ezekiel's vision.

[25 : 21] Even as she experienced intense oppression, she, in trauma, she insisted on removing her feet from the bottom of the riverbed and being swept away.

And let me be clear. If you have experienced trauma, take care of yourself first. I want to be clear about that. And yet, I do think, as I do one-on-ones with so many of you, I am amazed at the way in which God is calling us as these people who have these stories that are often really hard.

And yet, like, it's clearly calling us to be something needed in this city and this place out of that hurt. Like, I'm amazed at that. So, again, take care of yourself first.

And know that there's this deeper place that it seems like we are being called. So, how can we individually and communally discern ways to do the same thing?

To lean into this calling to follow God? I do not have an ending. So, here's what I want to say to you. If you don't remember anything else, it is, one, the journey starts with this good news that you can rest in the presence of God, in the inner court with God.

[26 : 47] And I know that some of you experience God's presence as absence. And yet, there are whole books of the Bible that speak to what it is to start with your senses, sensing God's creation, and knowing that in some way that represents who God is, what God has created.

Second, I think that this journey requires reimagining God and reimagining how we fit into this current that is meant to flow and hope and enliven the world, reimagining it, even as people who often were counted out.

And then the last thing is just not to be afraid to invest, to serve, to give, to show up, to disagree. All of that. All of that is a part of belonging. And I think that that is the only way that God's commonwealth of healing and flourishing can come through us.

Amen.