

# My People, Our God

Ezekiel 11:14-25

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The next four weeks I'll be preaching from the book of the prophet Ezekiel. We don't get to Ezekiel very often. One reason is that Ezekiel's prophecies can be very harsh. But contained within this book are valuable insights into covenant, our focus this Lenten season, identified with the theme Ties that Bind.

By way of introduction to the prophet Ezekiel, listen to what was written about him by Elie Wiesel, Auschwitz survivor and Nobel Peace Prize Winner,

No prophet was endowed with such vision—no other vision was as extreme. No man has shed such light on the future, for no other light was as forceful in tearing darkness apart. But, then, no one had ever seen such darkness, the total darkness that precedes the breaking of the dawn. . . .

When he is harsh, he seem pitiless; when he is kind, his graciousness spills over. .

..

It is enough to follow his gaze to be uplifted by the hope it conjures. Look when he orders you to do so, and you will be rewarded by the conviction that hope is forever founded and forever justified. Listen to his words, to his voice, and you will feel strong—stronger than death, more powerful than evil.

So, with that incredible introduction, hear now these words from the prophet Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 11:14-25

Then the word of the Lord came to me:

Mortal, your kinsfolk, your own kin,  
your fellow exiles, the whole house of Israel, all of them,  
are those of whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said,  
“They have gone far from the Lord; to us this land is given for a possession.”

Therefore say:

Thus says the Lord God:

Though I removed them far away among the nations,  
and though I scattered them among the countries,  
yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a little while  
in the countries where they have gone.

Therefore say:

Thus says the Lord God:

I will gather you from the peoples,

and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered,

and I will give you the land of Israel.

When they come there,

they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations.

I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them;

I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,

so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them.

Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations,

I will bring their deeds upon their own heads, says the Lord God.

Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them;

and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.

And the glory of the Lord ascended from the middle of the city,

and stopped on the mountain east of the city.

The spirit lifted me up and brought me in a vision by the spirit of God into Chaldea,

to the exiles.

Then the vision that I had seen left me.

And I told the exiles all the things that the Lord had shown me.

For the Word of God in scripture,

For the Word of God among us,

For the Word of God within us,

**Thanks be to God.**

When the nation of Judah was defeated by the Babylonian armies of King Nebuchadnezzar and many of the people were taken into exile, their faith was shaken. How could they trust in the promises of God if God had failed them so?

Have you ever asked that question? I suppose many of you have at some dark point in your life.

You see, God had made so many promises. To Abraham and Sarah there was the promise that they would become a great nation and that their descendants would live upon the land. When this Promised Land was settled, it was to be an insurance against slavery and occupation, a way for the people to provide for themselves, and to be free, living good lives. The promise had come to David and his descendants that they would occupy the throne in Jerusalem forever, ensuring peace and security to the people.

And, yet, here they found themselves—defeated, occupied, their land ruined, their people exiled. As the psalm says, they sat by the waters of Babylon and cried. How could they trust in the promises of God if God had failed them so?

In the midst of this crisis, the prophet Ezekiel spoke a vision he had received from God. He saw strange beasts, driving wheels within wheels, forming a flaming chariot. And on the chariot sat a throne and on the throne a form like a human form but made of fire and light. And everything was bathed in the splendid colors of the rainbow.

This wild and fantastical image conveyed a powerful message—God was on the move. God could not be contained by the land of Israel or the Temple in Jerusalem. No, God remained with the people, in the exile, in Babylon where they wept. But, not only was God present with them, God was working on their restoration.

This was a radically new vision of who God is, which spoke to the current needs of the traumatized people. But the message went further.

Ezekiel also claimed that God was responsible for all the suffering the people had endured. God had brought the evil upon them as a way of punishing them for their unrighteousness.

Of course this idea sounds quite harsh to us, for it is. This is not the theory of evil and suffering that Jesus teaches us in the New Testament.

Ezekiel, you see, was traumatized and part of a traumatized generation.

Last autumn I read *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* by David M. Carr. It's a good book, which explores the Bible through the lens of trauma theory, in particular looking for the ways that post-traumatic stress disorder may have impacted the authors of the text. This is a fascinating idea, and most clearly apparent in the prophet Ezekiel

David Carr explains that by claiming that God was responsible for the suffering of the people, "Ezekiel offered his contemporaries a way to make sense of what had happened to them. It allowed them to interpret Jerusalem's destruction and the exile in a way that left [God] in control, a way that did not assume [God] was powerless or did not care."

Yet, in the process of making this claim, which we might perceive as harsh, Ezekiel also helped lay the groundwork for a new understanding of God and the covenant to develop. From Ezekiel we hear God speak the powerful words, "You shall be my people, and I will be your God."

From that insistence upon covenant loyalty and faithful presence, developed the idea of God's compassion, which we encounter in the latter parts of Isaiah in texts like the familiar Advent hymn "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people."

So, we should understand Ezekiel as part of a long trajectory in which covenant theology ultimately leads to the loving message of Jesus.

When I was a sophomore in college the wife of the pastor emeritus of my home church called me to say that her husband wanted to give me his library. Dr. Weldon Marcum had been my mother's pastor when she was growing up and he only retired when I was a kid. By the time I was in college in the early 1990's, he was suffering from Alzheimer's. According to his wife Elizabeth, before he lost the ability to recollect, he had asked her to give me his library when he could no longer use it. The time had arrived.

So I went to their house and into his office filled with books and boxed them up. As I did so, Dr. Marcum would linger, watching me. How sad to see this once brilliant man suffering from this dreaded disease. Elizabeth kept assuaging my guilt, as I packed up a lifetime of reading and study and carried it away.

That incredible gift launched my own pastoral library and enriches my study with old volumes that otherwise might be absent in a current pastor's collection. One such book is *The Prophet of Reconstruction* written in 1920 by W. F. Lofthouse, a tutor in Hebrew Language and Literature from Handsworth College in Birmingham, England.

Lofthouse wrote in the wake of the Great War, what we now call the First World War. He wrote of "our bruised and scarred civilisation" and the great new era opening up for humankind. He believed it to be the most decisive moment in human history:

The stake was never so great, or so widely realised. To shake ourselves free for ever from the tyranny of war, or to be condemned to the prospect of conflicts growing steadily more savage and destructive till civilisation becomes its own murderer.

He concluded that at that moment "Nothing seems too good to be hoped for; nothing too evil to be feared." A frightening sense of possibility, don't you think?

What could help in this decisive moment? Lofthouse believed the words of the prophet Ezekiel, which offered hope and renewal in the midst of catastrophe, could speak to the devastation and the need to create something new.

But he isn't alone in his use of these ancient words.

For Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel, Ezekiel was also the crucial text for interpreting his experience and finding hope. He wrote, "No generation could understand Ezekiel as well—as profoundly—as ours."

And in the era when AIDS was devastating gay communities, Jim Mitulski, then the pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco who conducted 500 funerals a year, turned repeatedly to Ezekiel in order to learn about "an exiled community moving from devastation to resurrection."

Why does this sometimes harsh text hold such lasting power? Why is it effective in our times of catastrophe?

Because of the words spoken by God through the prophet "You shall be my people, and I will be your God."

These are words to remind us that God is always present with us, no matter where we find ourselves. They remind us that God is working for our deliverance and our salvation. God will be faithful to us and to her promises.

So, let us trust that God is going to bind us together as a people. No more will we be alienated from God, from other people, from our best selves. God will restore our home. Ours is a lasting hope.