

SERMON TITLE: “A River in Our Future”

TEXT: Ezekiel 47:1-14

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today is an unusual Sunday and this is an unusual sermon.

Like most of you, I was **not** expecting to see me up here this morning, but found myself hastily preparing a sermon last night due to the circumstances with Jeff and Tany.

Like most of you, I had been looking forward to meeting a young family and hearing about how God had worked in and through them in Burkina Faso.

The passage that Jeff was going to preach on today is the one we just heard from Ezekiel 47. I had anticipated hearing these words applied to their experiences and relationships with people across the world.

I had looked forward to opportunities for conversation with Jeff and Tany about what they had learned in their travels, how their experiences had shaped them as people, and what we, as North American Christians might learn from them about our own journeys of faith and discipleship.

But, as we all know, sometimes life presents us with tragic and unexpected surprises.

And so, today, we have come to worship and to hear from God through his word in the midst of uncertainty, confusion, possibly anger, and sadness.

What hope can these strange words from a strange prophet give us?

How can we locate **our** story in **this** story today?

It is often remarked that a picture is worth a thousand words, and I think there is much truth to this.

Pictures have the power to evoke a response from us. Pictures **move** us.

I think of the famous picture of the little girl running naked from a napalm attack in Vietnam in 1972.

Or, more recently, of a man caught in mid-flight after jumping from his office building in the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001.

These single images conjure up all of the horror of war and violence, and the terror and fear and awful choices they inflict upon human beings.

There are happier examples, too. Think of a picture of a smiling couple on their wedding day. How much emotion, joy, hope, and expectations (not to mention naiveté!) can a picture contain?

Or how about a picture taken of you or someone else at the summit of a mountain? Aside from the sheer beauty of the view and the surroundings, the picture symbolizes commitment, time, love for nature, physical exertion, the camaraderie of friendship, etc.

There is often a lot going on in a single image.

It may be difficult for us to get past the language style and the repetition of the passage Rebecca read, but what we have from Ezekiel here is essentially an image.

A bit of context might help us.

Ezekiel can be a difficult book to read or understand. It is filled with all kinds of oracles and visions, many of which depict events and places and metaphors that are unfamiliar to us.

There are apocalyptic images of destruction, there are winged creatures and angels and lions and wheeled objects and chariots.... Ezekiel is told to “eat a scroll” and to build a toy model of the city of Jerusalem, to lie on his side for a really long time to symbolize the number of days of Israel’s punishment.

Strange stuff.

And is not always pleasant reading either. Ezekiel is often called the “prophet of doom” and for good reason. The first 32 chapters of the book mainly consist of fairly grim oracles and prophecies against either the nation of Israel, for her idolatry and sin, or the surrounding nations.

Why would Jeff choose a text from this book to talk about their work in Burkina Faso?

Well, near the end of the book, the tone changes.

It shifts from judgment to restoration, from punishment to renewal, from despair to hope.

Near the end of the book, the Lord gives Ezekiel a series of visions of hope. Snapshots of a better day. Pictures of peace and goodness.

And our text this morning is one of those pictures.

So today, we're going to exercise our imaginations. We're going to try to imagine the image Ezekiel was giving to his weary and exiled nation.

We start with a **temple**:

In the Jewish imagination, the temple was far more than an impressive physical structure around which they ordered their worship and public life.

For the Israelites, the temple was fundamentally the place where God dwelled. We think of God as dwelling everywhere at once, of God dwelling in our hearts and minds through his Spirit, and tend not to put too much emphasis on physical building. But for the Israelites, the temple was the place where God was uniquely present.

And for a portion of Ezekiel's career, his people were without a temple. They were conquered by the Babylonians, hauled off into exile, and then, when they attempted a rebellion, their temple was destroyed.

For the Israelites, this would have been catastrophic, symbolically, socially, spiritually, in every way.

The temple was gone. It was a very, very dark time in the history of God's people.

But in Ezekiel's vision, the first thing we see is a new temple. God is back.

And from there, we get the picture of **water**. Water flowing from the temple, water flowing from the place where God dwells, water flowing, whose source is God himself.

We are given the image of a stream that is getting ever wider and deeper as it proceeds from the temple.

And then, what do we see? **Trees**. "A great many trees" (Ez. 47:7).

We see swarming, **living creatures**, fish, life, and "everything will live where the river goes," echoing the language of the creation story in Genesis 1, where God says "let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures."

Everything will live where the river goes.

The vision of this passage concludes with more trees, trees for food, trees whose leaves will never wither nor their fruit fail.

Why? Because the water for them flows from the *temple*.

In other words, because God himself is their source. Ezekiel says “their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”

Do you have an image in your head?

**It is an image of and vitality and sustenance and refreshment and healing—
an image of LIFE, coming from the place where God is.**

And it is an image given to and for a people probably a little short on hope, a little weary of suffering, confusion, and chaos.

It is a good image.

I think I can imagine how this image might have inspired and informed Jeff and Tany in their work amidst the people of the dry land of Burkina Faso, a people who, like Israel, were well acquainted with conflict, tragedy and suffering.

So we have this image from Ezekiel. Is it any good? Is it any help?

Does it change anything, for the people of ancient Israel, or the people of Burkina Faso, or for us, as we watch and wait and pray for Jeff and for his family?

Are images of life and hope worth anything in the midst of dark times, whether these dark times are in the context of nations or churches or individual lives?

Even though we may not know anything about the kind of exile Israel experienced, or about the reality of life in Burkina Faso, all of us are familiar with hard times.

All of us have experienced the illness or death of loved ones, many have financial hardship, the loss of employment, fractured relationships, the pain of failure and lost opportunities.

All of us know that the life of faith takes place in the context of a world where bad things happen, where there is a lot that we cannot control, where suffering is part of the landscape.

And sometimes it can be hard to be hopeful here.

Psalm 137 famously describes the experience of exile like this:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.

² There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
³ for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

⁴ How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land?

How can we sing hopeful songs when things look so bad?

Yet in a sense, this is *exactly* what we are called to do as followers of Jesus.

We are called to sing the songs of the Lord of life in the land of death and suffering and decay.

By doing this, we declare that images like Ezekiel's—images of life and goodness and hope are more real, and stronger, than images of exile, disorientation, and death.

We need hopeful images to do this. We need pictures of a reality beyond what our experience tells us is possible.

We need wild and crazy dreams and visions from God to sustain and guide us in this foreign land.

Images **are** important. In fact, they are vitally necessary for us as we follow Jesus in the in-between-time before he comes to make all things new.

We don't know how things are going to turn out for Jeff Warkentin. We don't know if there will be a happy ending for this family. We will continue to surround them with prayer and support, and entrust them to the care and wisdom of God.

But even though we don't know how this will turn out, we are convinced that even in the midst of tragedy, we follow a God who is the source of goodness, and life, and hope.

We are convinced, as followers of Jesus, that even though it is hard to sing songs of praise in a foreign land, that God is **with us** in this land of death and that he will come again.

We are convinced that the same God who gave Ezekiel crazy visions of creatures with four faces and chariots and angels and trees that never stop producing fruit, and rivers that keep getting deeper and wider giving life to everything around them... this same God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ, who talked about "living water," who said that those who drank the water

he gave would never be thirsty again and would “gush up to eternal life” (John 4:14).

We are convinced that the same God who delivered an image of a river of hope to weary exiles in a strange land through Ezekiel gave a similar image to the apostle John in the book of Revelation—a “river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb”; the same image of a tree full of fruit whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:1-2).

We are convinced that there is a river of hope and leaves for healing in our future.

We need images like these on mornings like these, when darkness seems stronger than light, so that like the exiles of Israel we can keep on singing the songs of praise in this strange, wild, and unpredictable land of beauty and sadness.

We need this crazy hope in a happy ending to make all of our sad endings fade away.

I am going to close with the words of Frederick Buechner from a book called *The Hungering Dark*:

So in Christ’s name, I commend this madness and this fantastic hope that the future belongs to God no less than the past, that in some way we cannot imagine holiness will return to our world. I know of no time when the world has been riper for its return, when the dark has been hungrier.

Thy kingdom come... we do show forth the Lord’s death till he come... and maybe the very madness of our hoping will give him the crazy golden wings he needs to come on. I pray that he will come again and that you will make it your prayer. We need him, God knows.

“He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

