

**Sermon Notes:** June 16, 2024

Lectionary Readings

**Focus:** Ezekiel and Exile and Juneteenth

**Ezekiel Backstory** In 587 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had conquered Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom of Judah. Ezekiel was taken captive and deported to Babylon 592 BCE. His prophetic ministry began a year later, while fully ensconced in exile.

He was prophet to the exiled Israelites, delivering messages of judgment for the exile's sin and their reason to hope for restoration. To me, he was shockingly permissive toward Babylon. Ezekiel's visions and prophecies were often symbolic, aiming to encourage the exiles to repent and believe in redemption - even in terrible circumstances.

Ezekiel was not particularly happy with his lot in life. He had been in training to be a Temple priest when the Babylonian invasion came. After deportation, he lived in a Babylonian designated resettlement area. Nothing was really happening until the visions started. His 30<sup>th</sup> birthday came and went, when he should have been installed as a priest in Jerusalem. The broad result of his visions was that God was portable, and he could still fulfill his calling in a foreign land, and his people still had a horizon of hope to look toward. They just need to repent and put a brave face while in exile, knowing that one day the Messiah would come.

**Today's reading** I really like Chapter 17 today. It's got metaphor, a lot of history, and a message of trust in difficult times. Below are several verses and my understanding to help ground what Ezekiel was trying to say.

*2: O mortal, propound a riddle and speak an allegory to the house of Israel*

a prophet's riddle turns into a history lesson.

*3 & 4 Say: Thus says the Lord God: A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to Lebanon. He took the top of the cedar. broke off its topmost shoot; he carried it to a land of trade, set it in a city of merchants*

The great eagle is Babylon. Lebanon represents Jerusalem and King Jehoiachin, who was taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar. The Jerusalem King is the cedar top. Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin's shoot and forcibly placed him in Babylon (a land of trade and merchants).

*5 & 6 Then he took a seedling from the land, placed it in fertile soil; a plant by abundant waters, it sprouted and became a vine spreading out but low; its branches turned toward him; its roots remained where it stood. So, it became a vine; it brought forth branches, put forth foliage*

Here, the "seed of the land" refers to Zedekiah, whom Nebuchadnezzar appointed as a puppet king in Judah. Nebuchadnezzar hoped Zedekiah would remain loyal

and fruitful like a planted willow tree. Zedekiah chaffed against Nebuchadnezzar's authority, symbolized by the vine's branches turning away.

*7 There was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage. And see! This vine stretched out its roots toward him; it shot out its branches toward him from the bed where it was planted so that he might water it. –*

The "other great eagle" represents Egypt, to whom Zedekiah turned for support in a military alliance against Babylon. Ezekiel really seems pro-Babylon to me. Maybe that is just a practical consideration of Babylon's power, but I think he really thinks that Nebuchadnezzar is God's mouthpiece who will teach Judah repentance.

*9: Say: Thus says the Lord God, Will it prosper? Will he not pull up its roots, cause its fruit to rot and wither, its fresh sprouting leaves to fade? –*

Zedekiah had it relatively good, but the Egyptian alliance would bite him hard.

*10: Look, it has been transplanted. Will it thrive? When the east wind strikes it, will it not utterly wither, wither on the bed where it grew? –*

Jerusalem's attempts to be free would wither in the desert wind of Babylon.

*19: Therefore, thus says the Lord God: As I live, I will surely return upon his head my oath that he despised and my covenant that he broke*

God reaffirms that Zedekiah will face the consequences for breaking his covenant with Nebuchadnezzar. Prophets regularly criticize leaders who, like us, would naturally chaff against foreign aggression and occupation. This makes me uncomfortable – would I / should I be a go-along-to-get-along-guy in the face of genuine suffering?

*Verse 21: All the pick of his troops shall fall by the sword, and the survivors shall be scattered to every wind, and you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken.*

The soldiers who would flee from the defeated resistance will be killed and the civilians exiled.

*Verse 22: Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain*

Here, God promises to take a young branch from the top of the cedar tree (symbolizing the Davidic line or Judah's royal family). In verse 22, God is much kinder than in verse 3 where Nebuchadnezzar is breaking off the cedar top. This "replanting" in v 22 is God centered (and maybe even v 3, these actions are God center in Ezekiel's mind). Specifically, v 22-24 refers to a future restoration of the monarchy where Judah will flourish again – independently. But I can't help but hear that protest chant "justice delayed is justice denied."

*23: In the mountain of the height of Israel will I plant it: and it shall bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a goodly cedar: and under it shall dwell all fowl of every wing; in the shadow of the branches thereof shall they dwell.*

God declares that this newly planted branch will grow into a majestic / messianic cedar in the future

*24: All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.*

God brings down the proud and raises up the humble. The messianic hope will spread from generation to generation.

**Ezekiel and Juneteenth** It may seem a bit unusual to thematically pair Ezekiel with Juneteenth, the day when the Emancipation proclamation made it to the shores of Texas. However, Ezekiel had been stolen from his native land, was marginalized and oppressed, and found a way to carve out dignity in very undignified circumstances. If Ezekiel had been an enslaved African, I wonder if he would be saying, “repent, and trust in God’s promised future”. I know I wouldn’t. Juneteenth is very much made possible by military might and not prayer alone.

**Juneteenth** I am going to do a quick overview of Juneteenth. The day commemorates the initial arrival of Union troops to the shores of Galveston, Texas in 1865. The celebration of this event continues to this day. The Diocese of California and the United States have both taken formal action to enshrine this day as a day of remembrance and celebration as well as a holiday. I want to take pains to point out in my sermon that if you feel late to the Juneteenth party, you are. Festivities have been going on since the late nineteenth century.

**Before the Proclamation** In the middle of the civil war, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. The war would not officially end until April 9, 1865, when Robert E. Lee surrendered at the Appomattox Courthouse. *Enforcement* of the Proclamation relied upon the force of Union troops.

As an aside, in 1866 the last of the enslaved people would be officially freed by the less well-known Treaty with the Choctaw and Chickasaw, April 28, 1866. Several indigenous groups had sided with the Confederacy. And they were belligerently pro-slavery and even owned many enslaved people. You can read [this webpage about the Choctaw Confederates](#) to get a better sense of some of the complexity of this period.

**The Exodus story was an inspiration to the enslaved people of the US** Exodus is about enslaved people longing to be free. God heard them and raised up Moses as their leader. You've got Moses famously saying, "Let me people go," and the great story of God parting the waters for freedom. Just as the Israelites were freed from physical slavery, we too are called to ask for help when we find ourselves in bondage both spiritually and physically, AND to be a liberating people for God by being willing to do something about the bondage of others. You can help others with personal addiction, community food deserts, crippling anxiety, or legal racism -- all of it belongs in the story of the exodus to the Kingdom of God where heaven and earth meet.

**Songs of Freedom: Underground Railroad helped move forward to emancipation.** You know that the Underground Railroad was neither underground, nor a railroad. I won't rehash all this history, but a dedicated group of abolitionists took it upon themselves to create a network. This was a secret network that people used to escape these work/concentration camps (politely known as plantations). Music was a part of this network.

Songs were used to communicate and instruct would-be escapees. There are many songs of the Underground Railroad, but you may have heard of "Follow the Drinking Gourd", "Wade in the Water", and / or "Go Down Moses." The lyrics of spirituals likely contained some encoded information marginally about escape routes, safe houses, and other details related to the Underground Railroad.

I caution you not to take this too far. Enslavers were smart too, and too much easily decoded information would have meant great suffering for the captives. So, without going too far: It *might* have been sung by different work parties to sing on the night when someone was planning to escape (for the network to help aid).

This musical is part of the Episcopal Church as well. "Lift Every Voice and Sing" is an authorized Hymnal of the Episcopal Church that draws heavily from the African American singing traditions. Spirituals served as a means of preserving cultural traditions, providing solace in the face of hardship, and fostering a sense of community among enslaved individuals.

**Juneteenth and Ezekiel (Oil and Water)** Ezekiel was not a top ten hit in pre-civil war enslaved communities. This makes sense to me because Ezekiel was "pro Babylon," and anti "throw off your oppressors." During the pre-civil war period, there were also white abolitionists and some black people who thought God would save them alone, and any active resistance was not trusting enough in God.

There is a long tradition of prophets believing that God punished the people for their arrogance, and they just needed to settle down and give their oppressors a pass. I don't really know how to balance the liberating impulse with the patience of the prophets, but maybe that's when the Holy Spirit must help me / us figure out when to trust and when to act, or when to do both. **Todd**