

August 20, 2023
Wading into the River of Life
Ezekiel 47:1-12

Two weeks ago, I commented that sometimes we find ourselves in tough places, emotionally, physically, even spiritually. Life doesn't go as planned. We seem to go from crisis to crisis. We may be miserable, anxious, or angry. We may feel we're lost in life, our relationships, our walk with God; we don't know where to turn. We feel like God has "left the building." Is there any way forward? Any future? Any hope?

FYI, since then, life (for me at least), has continued to spin out of control.

In that sermon, I noted the prophet Ezekiel was in such a place. He and many Jews were in exile in Babylon. Babylon had captured Jerusalem. The Temple was destroyed. It was the most horrendous catastrophe that ever happened to Israel.

In Ezekiel, the exile is directly linked to the spiritual state in Israel. People had been going through the motions of religion, but it was empty. They talked about God, but didn't live it out. The rich got richer; the poor poorer. Businesspeople, political leaders, and religious leaders lied and cheated. They had "hard hearts," "stubborn hearts," "sick hearts." There was no compassion. No justice. No integrity. No mercy. No love.

By definition, the Temple was where God's presence WAS among His people. Ezekiel had a vision of God actually abandoning His Temple in Jerusalem. God had left the building. He left His people. Was God done with them for good? Where's God when life hurts? When you're in the darkest valley? Is there anything future? Any hope?

Ezekiel has several visions showing him there is hope for God's people, even when life seems hopeless.

In one vision, God promises to raise up a new David, a new Messiah King, the kind of leader Israel always needed but never had (Ezekiel 34). Then, God will deal with their hard, stubborn hearts by giving them new hearts. He'll remove their hard hearts. He'll send His Spirit into His people, giving them new, soft, tender hearts, so they can love and obey God and live with love, justice, grace, and mercy (Ezekiel 36).

In the passage we read on August 6, Ezekiel sees a huge valley filled with dry bones; it's a metaphor for Israel's spiritual state: they're spiritually dead (Ezekiel 37).

But God raises the bones and gives them muscles and skin. A wind comes fills them with breath and life. Ezekiel sees new living, breathing, healthy, whole people standing in front of him. God tells Ezekiel His Spirit is coming to bring His people back to life.

The message? People had rebelled against God, resulting in death. But God can

perform a new act of creation and remake them with new hearts, filled with His Spirit, so they can live in a relationship of love with God, with each other, and creation.

When we invite God into the “dead” parts of our lives/church – when we invite His Spirit to fill us, change us, and recreate us – we find life, new life in Him.

There is another vision of hope Ezekiel is given for His people. Ezekiel has a vision of a new city and a new Temple, both larger and more elaborate than anything Jerusalem or the Temple had ever been (Ezekiel 40-46). Significantly, while Ezekiel had a vision of God’s Spirit abandoning His Temple and His people, now God’s Spirit – His personal presence – returns to this new Temple. God has re-entered the building. He is back among His people. There is hope again. There is life again.

This vision will be partially fulfilled when the Jews begin to return to Israel after 70 years of exile. The Babylonian Empire falls. A new physical Temple will be rebuilt (only to be destroyed again by the Romans in 70 AD). But that Temple was nothing like the amazing structure described in Ezekiel.

This prophecy is not really about a return from Babylon. God never calls this new city, “Jerusalem.” The last line of Ezekiel’s book tells us the name of this incredible city: “... *the name of the city will be 'Yahweh Shammah' – 'The Lord Is There'”* (Ezekiel 48:35).

The city of “Yahweh Shammah”/“The Lord Is There” is something bigger, better, grander, and more universal than the restoration of one city, in one country, at one time in history. God is telling us His presence is coming back among His people – **ALL** of His people in every place, every town, every city, every nation, once and for always. Where God’s Spirit is – wherever God’s Spirit is – there is life.

Let’s read what happens when this city of God’s Presence is built: Read Ezekiel 47:1-12

Ezekiel sees a tiny stream pouring out on the Temple steps. It quickly becomes a raging river, flowing out of the temple and the city, into the desert, into one of the most desolate places on Earth, the Dead Sea Valley. Along this river of life is a garden of trees, gardens, and swarms of living things. The Dead Sea itself becomes fresh and pure; it’s transformed into a living sea teeming with life. All this imagery comes from the Garden of Eden in Genesis, Chapters 1-2. In Genesis 2, we had a wonderful image of God, Adam, Eve, and all creation enjoying one another in perfect harmony. God’s mission is to restore that wonderful reality. God is rebooting His creation.

God wants to bring life to the dead places in our lives. Even more than that, He wants to bring life into the dead places of all of His creation. God’s plan has always been to restore all humanity **and** all of creation back to His life-giving presence.

Genesis 3 through Revelation 22 tells the story of God trying to bring his stubborn,

disobedient people back to relationship. He tries using the Law, but people can't keep the Law. He tries using Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites, to be His good news to the world. But, as Ezekiel and other prophets point out, that doesn't work. The Israelites fall just as short of God's will and perfection as the rest of us.

Ultimately God comes Himself, as Jesus, to show us how life is meant to be lived. In personal relationship with God. With love. With mercy. With forgiveness. With peace. With integrity. With compassion. With justice. With grace. With joy. He shows us full and abundant life as God designed it to be. But we can't deal with our sin on our own.

Jesus, God Himself in human flesh, dies on the cross so our sins and rebellion might be forgiven. He takes upon Himself all the evil in all the world – and all the evil within each of our souls – so that we might have life – new life – in and through Jesus.

God – the Sovereign Lord – CAN bring life, even in the dead places. *"I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations"* (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Jesus says, *"I will ask the Father, and he will give you an Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth... He lives with you now and later will be in you"* (John 14:15-17). Throughout the New Testament, God's promise to those who believe in Jesus is we are filled with/indwelt by/have received His Spirit.

Going back to the Old Testament: by definition, God's Temple is where God's presence IS among His people. God's presence used to reside in one room in one Temple in one city, Jerusalem. Now, God's Holy Spirit, His personal presence, is within **US**. **WE** are His Temples, temples of His Holy Spirit, individually, and as a church (1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19). Therefore, wherever we are, as individuals and a church, His presence is in that place. Wherever we are, God's Temple is there, the Kingdom of God is there, "Yahweh Shammah"/"The Lord Is There."

So now, like the vision in Ezekiel, God's Temple is so much bigger than any of us can possibly imagine. Wherever there is one person who believes in Jesus – from Alert to Antarctica, from Latvia to Lethbridge – God's Temple is there, the Kingdom of God is there, the City of God is there, "Yahweh Shammah"/"The Lord Is There."

Of course, much of this vision is still yet to be fulfilled. In Revelation 20-22, John gives a similar vision of this amazing heavenly city and a river teeming with life, at the end of all things. This looks forward to a full restoration of God's creation, the Garden of Eden, on a global, cosmic scale. We look forward to that time, one day, some day, when Jesus returns and all evil is once and for all, forever destroyed. When God's will is done perfectly on earth as it is in heaven. God's perfect presence will be everywhere.

But what about in the meantime? Where's God when life hurts? When you're in the darkest valley? Is there anything future? Any hope?

What Ezekiel, Jesus, Acts, the New Testament Letters, and Revelation, all tell us is "The Lord is here." We live in a new time when the Holy Spirit of God, Jesus Himself, is within us. Every moment. Every day. Right now. Forever. For always. Wherever we are, even when life hurts, the Kingdom of God is there, the City of God is there, "Yahweh Shammah"/"The Lord Is There." He is with us always. He gives us life.

Talking about the reality of the Spirit's presence within us, personally, and as a church community, Paul writes, *"What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? ..."*

"Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ... No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

"I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:31-39).

So ... individually we can face the future with confidence. God's Spirit is within us. He gives us life – full, teeming life through His Spirit. Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. Pray. Keep moving forward. God is with you. Always. With His Spirit within you, you can make it through dark valleys. You can live for God, today and every day.

As a church community we can face the future with confidence. God's Spirit is within us. He gives us life – full, teeming life through His Spirit. Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. Pray. And keep moving forward. God is with us. Always. With His Spirit within us, we can make it through dark valleys and serve Him in amazing ways.

God is with you always. He brings life into the dead places. Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord ...