

November 8, 2020 New Beginnings Pt. 8 Ezekiel 11:16-25

Ezekiel 11:16-25 is a marvelous passage in the Old Testament. It begins with this declaration: “The word of the Lord came unto me.” Ezekiel the prophet, is telling his audience who are in exile in the conquered countries that make up the Babylonian Empire. He is telling them, this is not my wisdom, or the result of my trying to work things out. This is the word of the Lord. And that word of the Lord begins with a shocking message for the exiles. They are not in exile because of Babylon’s superior military, better strategy on the field, or better technology in terms of weapons. The Lord says, “I sent you away. I scattered you.” (Ezekiel 11:16) The Lord God is sovereign...even when the times are difficult, painful, even when we would describe the times as bad times. That is an important insight of faith, in this time of plague, Covid-19. God is still God, and HE alone is in charge. I don’t pretend to understand the fullness of the meaning of all of that. But, such is the word of the Lord to his prophet Ezekiel and indeed to us.

And there is a word of comfort in the midst of that revelation. Our church buildings are constructed of wood, cement, bricks and mortar, and we love...absolutely love...to worship in the sanctuaries we have built. But in verse 16 of this 11th chapter the word of the Lord is, and sometimes we forget this, especially when we are hurting, God HIMSELF, Jesus HIMSELF, the Holy Spirit, HIMSELF is our sanctuary. For the faithful, when we remember it, sanctuary is not a place, it is a relationship, between the faithful and the LORD who redeems.

And in verse 17 the word of the Lord is about redemption, the bad time will not last. The exiles will eventually go home. As we have been told by our political leaders, this time of plague will end. And it will end because God will end it. And it will end “in HIS time.” By the way, I love that chorus, “In his time, in his time/ HE makes all things beautiful, in his time.”

The word of the Lord to Ezekiel makes several promises about the time to come, when we can sing the hymns of praise out loud, when we can afford to be in our brick and mortar sanctuaries for longer than 30 to 40 minutes, when we can sit close to our beloved faith family members, shake hands, and hug and not wear masks, all of which we must do in the time of plague. The Lord says, “I will give them an undivided heart.” (Ezekiel 11:19) I don't know about you but I do know what I feel in these days of the second wave of Covid-19. I have moments when I cannot resist the temptation to think it is going to go on forever. I worry about friends who have compromised immune systems. I have to make many decisions about what I will do and won't do because I have a compromised immune system as a cancer survivor. I worry about my children. I worry about the people whom I serve at St. Andrew's Stirling. I have lost sleep over the American election. It may seem dumb, but I am continually distracted by what is happening in the world, in my nation, in my province, in the church, in my town and even my neighbourhood. When this is over, and it will be, in God's good time, we are promised an undivided heart. We are in the midst of the fire right now. What we learn here is what is really important. Our

relationship to Jesus trumps everything, and clarifies our thinking about all the things that distract us. I love my family best, when Jesus gets first place in my heart. The Lord says HE will give me an undivided heart. Praise God.

HE also says HE will put a new Spirit within me. And HE makes that promise to you as well. In the midst of the pain and the trials of this hour, HE promises HE is leading me and you to a new era of relationship. Let me very clear about this. That does not mean HE is not with us now. HE is. That does not mean the Holy Spirit has been taken away from us, HE has not. It does not mean we have forsaken the Lord Jesus. What it does mean is that when this time of pain and anguish, second thoughts and worry is over, God will lead us into new beginnings. In the midst of the plague, God is seeding us for the next era of our walk of faith. We are even now being changed, prepared, for the work that lies before us. In the invitation to the Lord's table there is that marvelous phrase, "those who seek a greater growth in grace, are invited to the table of the Lord." New beginnings. The next chapter of our journey in faithful service. We will be refreshed, and a new spirit will burn within us, because we have been here, Covid-19, where it feels like we are exiled from everything we were used to. New beginnings.

As verse 19 ends we are promised a heart of stone will be removed from us, and we will receive a heart of flesh. Be prepared. Make ready. When this plague comes to an end, we are going to discover we feel things even more passionately,

than we have ever done before. You know the phrase, sadness makes the heart grow fonder. This time in which the limits are so defined, when we feel fenced in, confined, alone, too much on our own; these times are going to end. Our hearts and souls are being tenderized for the time after the plague of 2020.

One final word. Verse 25 describes what happened next with Ezekiel. The vision he experienced came to an end. (He) “told the exiles everything the Lord had shown (him)”. I share that with you. I was called into ministry as was Rebekah, my daughter, to bring the word of the Lord into your midst in a time of “blood and dying.” We are not alone. And God is not silent. He has not moved to some other country or vanished into heaven, abandoning us to this world and circumstances beyond our control. HE is with us. HE is with you. And even now HIS grace is being showered upon us in the midst of a time of trial, for what? For a time of new beginnings.

Let us pray;

Lord, I was not born into the time in which my parents experienced the Great Depression of the 1930's or the period of World War II. I do know that emergence from those terrible times brought into being a brave new world that cared about peace, even though wars continued to be a part of the universal experience. Most of us count the human family now in world wide terms. We care about abandoned children in places far away. We care about the suffering of peoples across the oceans. We care about people who are different from ourselves, who come from different nations, who have

different skin than we do. We acknowledge that YOUR Spirit is reminding us that we are all brothers and sisters. Grant us the boldness to embrace new beginnings, into which YOU lead us, and for which YOU are preparing us. Lead us we pray. Shape us we ask. Receive our praise even as we are being prepared for new beginnings, and greater measures of your grace. Amen