

“To Life!”
Ezekiel 33:7-11; Matthew 18:15-20
A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

The news of the day was bad, and everyone knew it. Forced from their homes, they made the long journey to a foreign country where they were tolerated, if nothing else. They were given land—although far from the best—and allowed to live together in their own communities. But it was not home. Home, for them, was gone now, and under the control of another nation. They rebuilt their lives as best they could. But no matter how hard they tried, they could not sing the old songs of hope and joy in a strange land. Instead, they kept to their tents, or houses, and tried to hold on to the fading memory of the life they had known before.

The composite sketch I’ve just drawn might well describe the plight of refugees in our world today. Whether they are from Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, North Africa, or South or Central America, the experience of being uprooted and relocated is a traumatic event in the life of any people. This is the challenge facing millions of people—about 80-million of them, according to the United Nations—in our world today.¹ Needless to say, this is a global, human tragedy, and it shows little sign of relief. The global refugee crisis reminds us of the questions that refugees throughout history have had to answer:

- How do you make a life when the one you knew is gone, quite probably for good?
- Where can you find hope for relief or, dare to even think about restoration?

The experience of the uprooted today is an echo of those who were forcibly relocated from Jerusalem over 2,500 years ago. We know about this from Hebrew Bible prophets such as Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel. Ezekiel 33 is the text for today’s lesson and I’ve gotta say, it makes for depressing reading. Here’s why:

- Ezekiel was called to be a prophet, to speak God’s word to the exiles from the city of Jerusalem.
- According to Ezekiel, the reason Jerusalem was overthrown is that the people turned away from God because they wanted to be like the other nations around them: They allied with foreign powers, worshipped other gods alongside the God of Israel, exploited the poor, and chose the path of violence instead of peace.
- As a result, God passed judgment on Jerusalem and the city was captured by the Babylonian Empire. Several thousand Jews were forced to leave the city over a 10-year period and relocated in Babylon.
- Ezekiel was among them.

Now in exile, these people of Israel faced life outside their homeland, life without God’s presence. God had judged them, found them wanting, and now they suffered the consequences of their own unfaithfulness. The judgments against Israel in the book of Ezekiel are unrelenting.

- Israel was a faithless bride (chap. 16) and a useless vine (chap. 15).
- Blood was on her hands (chap. 22).
- The people had prostituted themselves to other nations (Chap. 23)

With Israel depicted in pictures like these, we might be tempted to ask the question posed by Nathaniel when he was told about Jesus: “Can anything good come out of [Israel]?”

Exile is a dark place, no matter when or where or who is exiled. We hear the voice of despair in the words of the people: “Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; **how then can we live?**” (Ezekiel 33:10) Here is a picture of total defeat, something many of us can relate to, at least on a personal level. Feeling defeated happens when we think our life doesn’t matter, that we don’t count for anything, that nothing we do makes a difference.² When that happens, hopelessness reigns. There is no way forward, no way back; down seems to be the only option left.

And yet...and yet...and yet, there is a word from the Lord:

¹ “Refugee Data Finder,” UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, article on internet, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>, accessed 4 September 2020.

² Stephen L. Cook, “Ezekiel 33:7-11, Exegetical Perspective,” in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 29.

“So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me” (Ezekiel 33:7).

The prophet is appointed a sentinel, a watchman. He is to watch for the coming of a word from God.

Can this be a sign of hope? Can the act of appointing a watchman itself be a sign that all is not lost, that God has not abandoned God’s people, that maybe...just maybe, there is some future for them after all? The suggestion of hope comes in verse 11.

“Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live...” (Ezekiel 33:11).

Here is a turning point. After all the doom and gloom of preceding prophecies that threatened punishment and death, God speaks a word of life. This is where Israel’s story begins to turn around.

To use a popular culture example, this is a moment like that in the movie “E.T. (The Extraterrestrial)” when the little alien who came to earth has (apparently) died. He is in a metal box and the boy, Elliott, who was connected to him is saying his last farewell. Just after Elliott tells the lifeless body, “I love you,” he closes the lid. As he walks away, he notices a bunch of wilted flowers suddenly coming back to life. He’d seen this before, with the little alien. He turns back and discovers E.T. is alive!

Where it seemed as if death had won, life is an option once again.

God’s preference is for people to choose life.

And it is a choice. As the words in verses 8 and 9 remind us:

- Those who continue in their evil ways will die without hope.
- But there is life for those who change their ways to God’s way.
- And, it is the job of the sentinel to relay the word of God’s preference for life.

Please note, this part of the lesson is not a license to go out and pass judgment on other people; to take your “Repent or go to hell” sign out to the nearest street corner for all to see. That kind of behavior will get you some strange looks, un-neighborly words, and maybe a fat lip. Better to remember Ezekiel is one of the people; he stands between them and God, speaking God’s word, yes...but also voicing the fears and the hopes of the people to God.³ We might remember here the advice given by the Apostle Peter:

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...(1 Peter 3:15).

Gentleness and respect, mixed with firmness, also seems to be the approach advocated by Jesus in our Gospel lesson from Matthew 18. The situation here is similar in some ways to that of Ezekiel:

- Someone in the church is doing wrong—they’ve strayed from following God’s way. They’ve sinned against another member of the church.
- Jesus describes a process for reconciliation:
 - o First, you go and talk to your brother or sister who wronged you.
 - o If that fails, take a couple of other people along with you.
 - o If they still don’t listen, bring it before the church.
 - o And if the brother or sister still doesn’t listen to the church, then “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector” (Matthew 18:18).

Like the passage from Ezekiel, this one benefits from hearing it in a different way.

Many people hear this piece of scripture as the process for kicking someone out of the church. This is the “excommunication” approach. Follow the steps, and if the offender doesn’t change their ways, out they go! We are quick to want to get “troublemakers” out of the way, aren’t we? We are quick to forget that they, like we, are sinners too and are stand in the need of God’s mercy and grace. But look again.

- The goal of going to the person here is reconciliation, not rejection.
- And, look at the call to treat the offender as a Gentile and a tax-collector.

Jesus spent a lot of time with both. Jesus thought their lives were worth redeeming.

³ Angela Dienhart Hancock, “Ezekiel 33:7-11, Homiletical Perspective,” in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 29.

- Telling the church to treat a wayward brother or sister as a Gentile, or worse (after all, tax collectors are hard to like in any age), means they become an object for restoration, for evangelization...in short, an individual to be loved anyway.⁴

Someone will say: “Okay, pastor, but suppose this person never changes and I get tired of trying to persuade them?” My answer: Keep on showing them “a more excellent way,” the way of love, and let God do the rest. This morning’s scripture readings tell us the Church is here to remind the world of God’s desire for life.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is that when we place our trust in Him, we don’t get the punishment we deserve; instead, we get what we don’t deserve, forgiveness of sins and a new life. We cannot do this on our own—only God can bring about the changes in our situations, and in our hearts. That’s a message we need to live and breathe and have our very being in because of Jesus Christ.

Let me close with a story of hope:

Eugene Lang was a self-made millionaire who grew up in New York City. He graduated from an elementary school in East Harlem, P.S. 121, in the 1930s. Fifty years later, following a successful business career, he was invited to speak to 60 of the school’s sixth-graders. “I looked out at that audience of almost entirely black and Hispanic students, wondering what to say to them,” he recalled. Scrapping his notes, he decided to speak from his heart. “So I began by telling them that one of my most memorable experiences was Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, and that everyone should have a dream...then I decided to tell them I’d give a scholarship to every member of the class admitted to a four-year college.” At that moment, the lives of the students changed. For the first time they had hope. One of them said, “I had something to look forward to, something waiting for me. It was a golden feeling.”

Lang adopted the class, arranged for each student to have mentors and tutors. Eventually, over half of the students went to college; for many of those who passed up the college offer, Lang found jobs for them.⁵ He established the “I Have a Dream Foundation,” and over the course of his lifetime, gave away over \$150 million to education and helped 18,000 plus students.

Eugene Lang knew what it meant to find hope that leads to life, and he practiced giving that hope to others for a good part of his life.

Beloved, God provides us the hope that leads to abundant life in Jesus Christ. People today are languishing for want of hope, just as they have for thousands of years. We are not millionaire philanthropists, like Eugene Lang. But we are carriers of the message of hope from the God of Life.

Live that message. Know that whatever kindness you do for another, whether great or small, it makes a difference in somebody’s life.

Share hope.

Share love.

Share life!

Amen.

⁴ Raquel St. Clair Lettsome, “Matthew 18:15-20,” in *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 3, Season After Pentecost*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 297.

⁵ Enid Nemy and Joseph Berger, “Eugene Lang, Investor Who Made College Dreams a Reality, Dies at 98,” *The New York Times*, April 8, 2017, article on internet, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/08/nyregion/eugene-lang-dead-harlem-college.html>, accessed 4 September 2020. “Hope,” SermonIllustrations.com, article on internet, <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/h/hope.htm>, accessed 4 September 2020.