

THE UNLEASHED GOD

Scriptures: Ezekiel 1:1-28; Matthew 14:22-27

This morning's sermon will be a kind of running commentary on our second scripture lesson. Almost every verse in Ezekiel, chapter 1 is confusing, and yet the chapter is crucial for understanding the rest of the book. So I will read it in sections, and part of the sermon will be after each section. Turn Ezekiel 1 (OT, p. 769) and let's begin with verses 1-3. (Read vs. 1-3)

In 597 B. C. the Babylonian army marched into Israel and surrounded Jerusalem. Jehoiachin, the king of Israel, surrendered, and the Babylonians took control of the city, looting the temple and taking thousands of prominent Jewish leaders into exile, including a young priest named Ezekiel. The map shows Jerusalem and the path by which the exiles were taken from Jerusalem to Babylon. Verse 2 says that Ezekiel's vision came to him in the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin.

Imagine the situation of Ezekiel and the other Jewish captives. They must have felt abandoned by God. God had promised them a land, and they had just been kicked out of it. God had promised there would always be a descendant of King David to reign as king in Jerusalem, and that descendant had just been deposed. God had given them a temple in Jerusalem as a sign of God's presence, but Ezekiel was now separated from the temple and all its familiar furnishings by 600 miles of desert. It is how I picture Joel Preuninger and other service men and women must feel when they are stationed in Iraq. In a sense they are in exile. They are thousands of miles from their home and church, just like Ezekiel. Only Ezekiel did not have the internet. This sets the stage for what happens next. Look at verses 4-21. (Read verses 4-21)

Last Wednesday morning we read this scripture passage at the weekly Bible study I lead at the House of Charity. When we finished one of the participants said, "Wow, if I saw something like that I'd sober up."

You wonder if Ezekiel needed to sober up. Winged creatures with four heads, wheels with eyes in their rims, something that looked like burning coals of fire in the middle of it all—I doubt that we could even draw a picture of this scene. It is too weird.

And that is the key to understanding it. This vision is not meant to be drawn. It is not meant to be pictured realistically. It is meant to be understood symbolically. It is an amalgamation of images taken from various places in the Old Testament which, put together, convey a message to Ezekiel and his fellow captives.

Let me start with verse 4: "As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually." Keep your finger at that point in the Bible, and look back in the bulletin at our call to worship from Psalm 18. It says, "He rode on a cherub and flew, he came swiftly on the wings of the wind." Further down it says, "Out of the brightness before him there broke through his clouds hailstones and coals of fire." This image of a storm wind coming with flashes of fire is taken from Psalm 18, and it means that God is coming.

Did you notice how our call to worship began? Psalm 18 says, “In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help.” Those could have been the words of Ezekiel and the other Jewish captives in exile. The vision of Ezekiel 1 is God’s response: “He came swiftly on the wings of the wind.”

By the way, if you look at the map, you can see why the wind came from the north. Jerusalem was almost due west of Babylon, but when the captives were taken from Jerusalem to Babylon, they were taken around by way of the north to avoid having to cross the Arabian desert. God comes to Ezekiel from the north on the very path by which Ezekiel was taken into exile.

Psalm 18 says that God rode on a cherub and flew. That gives us a clue to the winged creatures in Ezekiel, chapter 1. The winged creatures are cherubim, kind of like winged angels. They are specifically called that in Ezekiel, chapter 10.

Again keep your finger in Ezekiel 1, and turn to I Kings 6:27 (OT, p. 309). In I Kings 6 Solomon is building the temple, and these verses describe some of the furnishings that Solomon made for the temple. Look at verse 27:

He put the cherubim in the innermost part of the house; the wings of the cherubim were spread out so that a wing of one was touching the one wall, and a wing of the other cherub was touching the other wall; their other wings toward the center of the house were touching wing to wing.

Winged creatures called cherubim were part of the furnishings of God’s temple in Jerusalem. They were among the familiar objects that Ezekiel remembered from his church back home. Only now these objects have come alive and are flying to Ezekiel in Babylon. The furnishings of the temple have become mobile. The glory of God, which Ezekiel associates with the temple in Jerusalem, is now flying to him across the desert.

Which brings me to the wheels. Turn back to Ezekiel 1, and look at verses 16-17:

As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: the appearance was like the gleaming of beryl; and the four had the same form, their construction being something like a wheel within a wheel. When they moved, they moved in any of the four directions without veering as they moved.

The idea of a wheel within a wheel is hard to picture, but the point is clear. They have total mobility. They can go in any direction. The wheels represent the chariot on which the winged creatures and God travel. They can go anywhere, even to Ezekiel in Babylon.

By the way, the eyes in the wheels mean that God sees. Back in Exodus when the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt, God said to Moses, “I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them.” God saw what was happening to the people of Israel in Egypt, and God sees what is happening to them in Babylon.

Back to Ezekiel, chapter 1. Let me read the last paragraph of the chapter: verses 26-28.
(Read verses 26-28)

There is an often told story of a Sunday School student who was trying to draw God. Her teacher told her, “No one knows what God looks like.” Undeterred, she said, “They will now.”

In these verses Ezekiel tries to describe God, but it is not very easy. He says that God looks like a human but not really, that God is like fire but not exactly, that God is like a rainbow only so much more majestic than that. Ezekiel has a hard time describing God. That’s why the images are so bizarre and confusing. But the point still comes through. Ezekiel may be 600 miles from the temple in Jerusalem, but he is not beyond the reach of God. God’s glory in all its indescribable splendor is coming his way.

The best parallel I can think of to Ezekiel 1 is our first scripture reading from Matthew 14. The disciples are caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is back on the shore praying, so the disciples are on their own. They are separated from Jesus, just as Ezekiel felt separated from God living 600 miles from God’s temple. But then Matthew says, “And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.” The disciples were terrified, which is how Ezekiel felt when he saw his vision. The disciples were terrified and shouted, “It is a ghost.” But it wasn’t a ghost; it was Jesus himself coming to them.

William Barclay, a famous Bible scholar from England, was once asked what really happened in this bizarre story of Jesus walking on water. He replied, “I have tried to understand what happened historically. I have tried to look at the text and its history, and I have many unanswered questions. But this I know: when my young daughter died a tragic death, this Jesus came across the sea and stilled the troubled waters of my soul.”

Friends, that is what Ezekiel chapter 1 is all about. God can still reach you even when you are in exile, even when you feel separated from God by miles of desert and years of painful experience. In fact, God comes to you on the very waves that are threatening to swamp you; God comes to you on the very wind—the very storm—that is threatening to blow you down.

Do you remember the hymn we sang at the beginning of the service? The second verse says,

O tell of God’s might, O sing of God’s grace,
Whose robe is the light, whose canopy space.
The chariots of heaven the deep thunderclouds form,
And bright is God’s path on the wings of the storm.

That’s the message of Ezekiel chapter 1.

- Ken Onstot
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