



First United Church of Oak Park

The Wheels are Sounding

Ezekiel 1, 2

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Ezekiel was a priest, and he knew where to find God. If Ezekiel ever wanted to be close to the presence of God, he knew exactly where to go. God was in the temple. To come into the presence of God, first he came into the courtyard of the temple, to the great altar.

On that altar, there the sacrifices of an entire nation were being burned day and night, and so the altar was always surrounded by a great cloud of smoke with fire flashing inside of it. Beyond the altar, inside the temple itself, there was incense burning on top of coals of fire and candles everywhere dancing to and fro. And beyond the cloud of incense, a final inner room.

And there in the holiest of holy places, golden statues gleamed. They were statues of strange composite creatures, with wings like an eagle and a body like an ox and claws like a lion and a face like a child of humanity. And the strange golden gleaming creatures, they held their wings together like a throne. The Ark of the Covenant, the mercy seat. That is where God's presence was.

But then cataclysm struck. Terrible events far beyond Ezekiel's control swept down. The temple was destroyed; not one stone was left on another. The world fell apart, and the people were driven away from what they had known and made to live in a land of hardship and alienation and distrust.

So the prophet Ezekiel was in mourning. At the beginning of the passage we heard read today, Ezekiel lay on the banks of the river Chebar. A place far from home. He was mourning because his nation had fallen apart, and with the temple in ruins, he did not know even how to find God.

But there on the banks of the river Chebar, Ezekiel had a vision. A great cloud of smoke rushed toward him. And the cloud of smoke towered over him, and there was a flame burning at its center, too, a flame pouring out smoke as if there were a thousand-thousand sacrifices burning on an unseen altar.

And beyond the cloud of fiery smoke there were coals burning like incense braziers, and beyond there were living creatures moving, strange composite creatures, ox and eagle and lion and human, gleaming but not like dead gold statues; these were huge and wild and alive and moving. And the creatures held their wings like they were a throne, a mercy seat from which the presence of God shone like a rainbow after a storm, an ark as indestructible as the covenant between God and the people. Ezekiel looked, and it was as if the temple itself had come to life, once a building, then rubble, now wonderfully and terrifyingly alive and filled with the presence of God.

Then Ezekiel saw the wheels. High and terrifying and as loud as thunder, as loud as a roaring waterfall. Each was like a wheel within a wheel moving this way and that. And the wheels had borne the living creatures to Ezekiel; there was no place in the world that the wheels could not go. Beside the river Chebar, the wheels had borne the presence of God to Ezekiel. If Ezekiel lived the rest of his days in Babylon, the wheels would bear the presence of God to him. If Ezekiel should take the wings of the

morning and settle at the far limits of the sea, the marvelous wheels would bear the presence of God to him.

When the world fell apart and everything he had known was lost or altered beyond recognition, Ezekiel felt he had lost God, too. But God is not like that. God is not contained in one time or place, God is not God only in seasons of prosperity and good cheer. The vision of Ezekiel, the living temple, the wheels within wheels. This vision reveals that when we cannot find God, when we give up even trying to find God, God will find us.

God is wild and alive and moving and present to people — most powerfully and unmistakably present — when people have no idea how they are supposed to find God.

The events of these past weeks have done what I had not thought was possible — they have deepened the turmoil and rancor and pain of this country. A troika of racist incidents spread across the country at the speed of the internet, most searingly in the videotaped slaughter of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man pinned down and suffocated to death over a \$20 bill. Twenty dollars. Can this be how the life of a Black man is valued in this country? No wonder this week saw protests in all 50 states. No wonder the cry of Black Lives Matter has risen to a keening scream. Set against the backdrop of a pandemic snuffing out 100,000 lives disproportionately affecting Black people, our country was a tinderbox needing only a spark, a dried-out desert needing only one bolt of lightning. And it has struck.

I am in mourning, hoping not for a return to how things were — because how things were is exactly how we got to this atrocious state of devastation — hoping for I don't know what. A new world? Something I can't build on my own, something I can't even

imagine. So I march, and make signs, and go to protests, and throw my little self into the common lot of those screaming “Black Lives Matter.” And the question that my feet are asking as they march in the street is the same question that my tears are asking as I read the news, is the same question my heart is asking as I hug my daughter close and kiss her goodbye, as I walk out into a dangerous world with my armor and shield no thicker than a cotton mask, it is all the same question: **Where is God?** Perhaps you are there, too.

I think the prophet Ezekiel would have a lot to say. Ezekiel would say, we have a lot in common, you and I. Ezekiel would say to you, it is just when you cannot find God — that is when God finds you. Ezekiel would say to you, it is just when the world has fallen apart and you look around and you cannot recognize the home you once knew, it is just then that something like the crashing of wheels, marvelous wheels, begins sounding in the distance.

Ezekiel would say to you, when your own faith has burned out and you have nothing to offer but need, that is just when God comes wreathed in flames and smoke, as if the fervent prayers of the entire world were burning on an unseen altar, flames of creation and birthing and power, flames of the spirit of God. Ezekiel would say to you, when the world has ground you down, and every path leads to nothing but more of the same, when every day is just the same but somehow worse and worse and the world turns to desperate things, it is just then that God arrives borne aloft by strange creatures that mock reason and confound understanding, all wings and haunches and claws and knowing eyes and unexpected turns of fate.

God is wild and alive and vast beyond understanding, borne aloft in eerie grandeur atop the wheels within wheels, sounding as they move —

When you're suffering, God will weep with you.

When you're wandering, God will search for you.

When you're grieving, God will comfort you.

When you've fallen, God will lift you.

When you wander, God will find you.

When you're dying, God will hold you.

God loves you, God claims you, God made you, you are Hers.

And if you find yourself beyond the farthest limits of the sea, or if you are on the paths of the valley of the shadow of death, and life has forced you to your knees, if you are crying from the depths of your soul, "Where is God?" it is then that you will hear the voice of someone speaking. A voice like many waters, saying: "O mortal, stand up on your feet. I would speak with you."