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Waterford Mennonite Church
November 12, 2018 - Child Safety Sunday
Ezekiel 47:6-12; Revelation 22:1-7

I believe that we need to begin this sermon with simply acknowledging our deep sorrow that we need to even have such a service as this. To pause and name our deep sorrow that we must talk about protecting our children because we know, as Pastor Katie shared earlier, that statistically the pain of childhood abuse is extensive and broad. We here at Waterford have not been exempt from such abuse, as evident by the litany of stories that have been shared during this service. And so we begin by naming our lament, our pain, our anger, our deep sorrow.

As the pastoral team we desire to create a paradigm and environment here at Waterford where truths are heard and a space is created to name what has happened in the darkness. Our vision is to live in the light and to invite others to join us - especially those who have experienced life hidden in the darkness as the abused or as the abuser. Our vision is to live in the light and as we desire to do that we begin by naming that we will not allow that darkness to continue. This service is one way we are seeking to bring to light a subject that has been too long held in the darkness.

In the order of service you can see that this sermon falls under the segment entitled "Naming the Vision of Safety for our Children." Those planning this service have selected two passages for us to look at this morning. The first one is from the Old Testament Prophet Ezekiel, and the second one comes from John's Revelation. As this section of the service seeks to name our vision of safety for our children we begin by noting that both of these texts include apocalyptic visions. They both paint a vivid image of what is to come in the end times. Instead of describing how they see life today, both Ezekiel and John hold out a vision of what is to come.

These visions are meant to provide inspiration, hope, comfort, and courage as the followers of God continue to live here in the present.

In the Bible we find a variety of examples of apocalyptic writings from the Old Testament, such as within the book of Daniel, to the New Testament, including the final book of the Bible, Revelation. While the genre of apocalyptic literature shares the similarity of focusing on the end times, within their visions they differ on specifics and thematic elements that distinguish them one from another. Today's two vision however are connected in their imagery and thematic usage of the River of Life.

This passage in Ezekiel was written around 573 BC while Ezekiel was in exile in Babylon. He had been a priest in Israel, but unable to continue as a priest in the new lands he became one who spoke the prophetic word. His words were originally given to a people who were experiencing life in exile, away from their homelands, and all that is familiar. His words are to ones who are suffering, experiencing alienation, pain, fear, and isolation. I am reminded of one of the biblical proverbs which states: "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). So here we find Ezekiel projecting a new vision for the people to hold onto as they walk toward the future.

We enter the middle of Ezekiel's vision which actually begins several chapters earlier in chapter 40. Just prior to chapter 40 he has proclaimed a "new leadership, a new land, and a people with a new heart and spirit within the land. Now he envisions a new "human geography" – a new relationship of the Lord to the land, and a new relationship of the people to one another upon the land."ⁱ Then beginning in chapter 40 Ezekiel shares an extended eschatological vision. This larger vision can be divided out into three smaller sections: The Temple Tour, Temple Laws and the River of Life, and The Land and the City.ⁱⁱ

So, just to note, before we reach our passage in chapter 47 Ezekiel has already given considerable time to describing this vision. Chapter 47 begins by stating “The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east.” Ezekiel continues to tell how he is led into the water three times, with each time the water getting deeper and deeper. First it is only ankle deep, and then knee deep, and then up to the waist, and then finally so deep that no one could cross the river. “Similar to the parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32), the effect of God’s rule (and kingdom) begins with a trickle and increases as it flows along, growing under its own power.”ⁱⁱⁱ Ezekiel is then led back to the bank of the river and we pick up the passage for today.

As Ezekiel arrives back to the bank of the river he sees a great number of trees on each side of the river. It is significant to remember that his vision takes place in the desert - in a place lacking of water, green growth of creation, and clearly one that lacks the presence of trees. However, in his vision he sees lots and lots of trees. And, they are healthy and thriving trees beside the water that flows down and enters the Dead Sea.

Now this sea is the “lowest place on earth. It has no outlet and is stagnant without fish. But like the transformation motif of the resurrection, everything will live where the river goes.”^{iv} Ezekiel shares though that this river of living water will even transform the Dead Sea into a sea teeming with life! There will be all kinds of fish and swarms of living creatures! Where the environment had been hostile and toxic to life, it will be transformed to a place of sanctuary and safety.

Ezekiel returns to the landscape around the river to celebrate that there will be all kinds of trees thriving in the midst of the desert. They will bear fruit every month because they are nourished from the water that flows from the sanctuary. The fruit of the trees are to nourish those who eat of it, and the leaves are to be used for healing. In Ezekiel’s vision the land is transformed

and healed from the dry, weary, dissolute desert to become an environment bursting with life and hope. The trees signify this changed landscape, as well as signify the hope of the changed landscapes of the individuals who dwell within this vision - those who like the land are in need of healing and wholeness.

In his vision Ezekiel vividly paints a picture of a new environment, a new reality. I love how he closes out his vision in the last verse of this book. He writes, “And the name of the city from that time on will be: The Lord is There.” Amen.

Turning to John’s vision in the book of Revelation we see that John names the city the New Jerusalem. I remember being a young child and wondering how does the Bible end? I felt like I had often heard about “In the beginning...” Well, what happens “in the end” dot, dot, dot? Well our second passage today comes from the *last* chapter in the *last* book of the Bible – Revelation 22. Like our first vision in Ezekiel, this passage too is part of a larger vision that begins in chapter 21, often entitled A New Heaven and a New Earth.

After John is shown the architectural tour of New Jerusalem he is then shown “the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city.” Similar to Ezekiel’s vision there are trees on each side of the river that bear crops of fruit for every month, and the leaves are for the healing. Revelation 22 recreates the Garden of Eden and continues by transforming Ezekiel’s initial vision as the river and the trees now are described as being the water of *life*, and the trees of *life*. Opposite of life is death, opposite of living is dying. John is clear that in *that day* the water and the trees will be bursting forth with life, wholeness, and healing. He continues this powerful vision by declaring in verse 4 that all will see God’s face, and God’s name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light.” Hallelujah!

Millard Lind writes in the Believers Church Commentary that “one of the most blessed statements in Revelation is: “They shall see (God’s) his face” (22:4)... In ancient times to see God meant death: (quoting from Exodus) “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see and live” (Exod. 33:20).”^v However on *that day*, in this complete vision of what is to come, we shall see God’s face, and we shall be seen. John adds that as we are seen we will bear the name of God on our foreheads.

Perhaps like me you have already played the game where cards are passed out, and without looking at it you put a card on your forehead. Now on the card is the name of a famous person or character. The task of the game is to walk around the room and ask others yes or no questions about your card to try to determine what name is on your forehead. This game is usually quite comical as we can see the names that marks the other, and so we chuckle when their questions can be so far off base! It can also be comical to watch a grown adult try to guess that on their forehead is Elmo, or Minnie Mouse, or Elvis.

But in all seriousness though, in our fallen world we as well as others around us try to put all kinds of names and labels on our foreheads. This is especially relevant today on the Sunday when we recognize the prevalence of child abuse and strive to do all that we can to protect our children, while also bringing to the light abuse that has already happened. In that final day, as the leaves of the trees bring healing, we can also imagine that one by one by one the labels fall off our foreheads and all that is left is the beautiful, healing, redeeming name of God.

I also celebrate and cling to the vision that in *that day* there will be no darkness, no need for a nightlight to chase away the ghosts, real or imaginary, that taunt and abuse in this world. As we long for that day we long for the full realization of verse 5 – “There will be no more night.”

Ezekiel was written around 573 BC, and Revelation was written in the 1st century AD. I wonder what is the vision that God would share with us today for *that day* that is coming? I

believe that Ezekiel's and John's visions are ones that continue to speak words of hope for us today. Some of us this morning might be experiencing being in the sea, in the lowest place on earth. Or perhaps others are experiencing life as being in the middle of the desert. Others might be fearing the night and the nightmares or pain that arrives with the darkness. Others might instinctively want to rub their forehead as it feels bogged down with labels that speak untruths.

For each of us these passages hold out for us a vision of healing and hope of what will be fulfilled on *that day*. There *will* be a day when the river and trees of life flow and grow and thrive. There *will* be a day when there will be no more darkness. There *will* be a day when there is no more pain. There *will* be a day when healing is realized and complete. There *will* be a day when we will look on the face of our Rock and Redeemer. There *will* be a day when we gather together to worship and praise God, and no longer feel fear. There *will* be a day when there is no more child abuse.

Until this day comes, may we do all that we can to usher in the kingdom now. May we speak words of healing and hope to each other. In the darkness of the night may we hold out the Christ candle for each other. In the midst of pain and tears may we be present to listen, to comfort, to accompany. In the midst of the threat of abuse, may we join together as a body of faith to declare and to work for the safety of all our children. In the midst of this world, and its brokenness, may we live into the promise of wholeness, healing, and vitality. May we declare to each other that the Lord is here, in this town, in our faith community, and in our homes. And may we hold onto the visions of Ezekiel and John of *that day* when the image will become a redemptive reality to be celebrated and embraced.

In God's time, and by God's grace, may it be so.

ⁱ Millard Lind, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Ezekiel* (Herald Press: Scottdale, Pennsylvania), 325.

ⁱⁱ Lind, *Ezekiel*, 325.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lind, *Ezekiel*, 350.

^{iv} Lind, *Ezekiel*, 350-351.

^v John R. Yeatts, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Revelation* (Herald Press: Scottdale, Pennsylvania), 424.