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# HITTING BOTTOM

EZEKIEL 10:1-5, 18-19, 11:22-23

PSLAM 139:1-12

LUKE 7: 36-50 9

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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I don't do flip turns well. When swimming laps, the skilled swimmer does a beautiful flip to change directions. When approaching the wall, the swimmer strokes steadily, and when close to the wall, at just the right distance, she finishes her stroke, and when both hands are at her hips, she tucks her head, curls her body, does a kind of underwater somersault, then with her feet planted directly against the wall, she gives a firm push, gracefully gliding underwater and rotating to a prone position, until it is time to come up and start stroking again. All this happens in seconds, much less time than it takes to describe it.

I have never been a competitive swimmer, but I have enjoyed lap swimming as a form of exercise. My efforts to do a flip turn are not pretty. I don't get the timing right. Sometimes, I tuck too soon and because I am too far from the wall, I miss the strong push away from the wall to get me started on the next lap. Sometimes, I flip too late and just whack my hand or feet on the wall. And these days, anything related to a somersault or flip makes me dizzy, which, of course, has nothing to do with my age.

I think it is because I can't do a flip turn well that I admire the elegance of those who can. Changing directions can be a beautiful thing.

As you may know, this summer we are wrestling with the book of Ezekiel, both in the Bible study that takes place before worship and in a preaching series. In many respects, a central message of the book is a call to change directions. Unfortunately, that change is hard. Very hard.

The section of Ezekiel we are considering this morning is chapters 8-11, the second vision report. In this vision, the glory of the Lord leaves the temple in Jerusalem. This was an incredibly difficult moment for the ancient Israelites, and a moment for which we probably have very little intuitive understanding. If Ezekiel is sometimes confusing reading, it is not because of any lack of intelligence on your part. This is challenging material.

The backstory is two-fold. First, over a period of many years, the people of Israel began to invest more and more authority in the temple in Jerusalem. It was a holy site, the place where the people could meet God. This particular building, this single site in a single city, was where God was thought to dwell. Worship sites hither and yon had been dismantled and the people were encouraged to come to Jerusalem to worship. Imagine the investment of spiritual commitment to one place. It is not just that the Jerusalem temple was sacred, it was **sacred**. It was God's dwelling place.

As modern Christians, this may be hard for us to imagine. We know that God is with us, no matter where we are. And we casually affirm that God is present with us at home on a Sunday morning as much as in church; some may even claim that God's immanence is even more palpable during a sunrise on the beach than during an ordinary Protestant worship service. Yes, certainly, we can meet God in all sorts of settings, and yet, we know a little bit of the importance of place. When Duke Chapel was closed for renovation during the 2015-2016 academic year, we worshiped in auditoriums on campus. Worship attendance decreased. And more than one faithful Christian said, "It just doesn't feel the same." We know we can invest a place with meaning, for this is where our children are baptized. This is where we declare our love to a spouse. This is where we proclaim the resurrection as we face the mystery of death. Here in this place we have heard a holy call, known the divine presence, and have united with the people of God. Yes, God is everywhere, and for us, because of our history, God is uniquely here. And I hasten to add that for others God is uniquely present for them in their church.

Now take that commitment to a sacred place, and multiply it, intensify it, and maybe we begin to imagine what the temple may have been to the ancient Israelites. Robert Browning might claim that “God's in His heaven— All's right with the world!”<sup>1</sup>, but the Israelites would have been more likely to claim God is in the *temple*, therefore all is right with the world.

The importance of the temple is one part of the backstory for this passage, the second is sin, specifically idolatry, specifically in the temple. The chosen people of God, who are in a covenantal relationship with God, who have been given land to call their own, are not living according to the covenant. They are worshiping false gods. Ezekiel's vision includes several disturbing scenes. In one scene, women are in the temple weeping for a fertility god, perhaps praying for the success of the harvest. (Ezek 8:14-15) In another scene, men have their backs to the temple and are bowing to the sun, worshiping the sun rather than God of Abraham and Sarah. (Ezek 8:16) It is bad enough that the people who have been claimed by God have turned to false gods, but their sin is compounded because the evidence of idolatry is in the temple, God's own temple, the place where God resides. The very place where the people are to meet the One Holy God is the place where the people are worshiping idols.

God is not pleased.

In fact, God is so jealous, so angry, that there is a great deal of violence and mayhem. It is a terrible scene of judgement. And then, God's presence, God's glory, leaves the temple. Ezekiel describes seeing cherubim, wheels, and the glory of the Lord above them, moving out of the temple. (Ezek 10:18-19, 11:22-23)

Imagine the shock and horror of thinking you have been deserted by God. For the ancient Israelites, it could not have gotten any worse. They were hitting bottom. The situation was very ugly. Very painful.

The phrase “hitting bottom” is often used in the recovery community. As you know, alcoholism and other addictions are terrible diseases. They are progressive and often fatal. 6% of our population have alcohol use disorder<sup>2</sup> (that is one out of 16 people) and many more are impacted by this disease because they happen to love someone who is ill. Alcoholism can cause chaos in families and drive the non-drinkers just as crazy as it drives the drinkers. Full recovery is less common than we would wish, with only 35% finding lasting sobriety.<sup>3</sup> Alcohol abuse is only part of the story; there are many other addictions as well.

When the addicted who do find recovery, it is often “hitting bottom” that is the catalyst for change. While the lowest point may be different for each person -- losing a job or spouse or home or health -- it is the point when the individual recognizes the full impact of the disease and their response to it. It is the moment they come to themselves, shocked that they thought a pig pen would be a good source of food. (Luke 15:16-17) They have slammed full force into their biology, culture, history, and actions. It is ugly and painful.

Out of love, family and friends try to spare each other what is ugly and painful. Sometimes we protect each other, cover for each other, make excuses for each other, pretend for each other. Depending on the situation this may be acceptable for a time. In recovery from addiction, however, many who are healing will say that they needed to hit bottom. It was only then that they could turn. Only then that they could find their footing and begin to push off in a different direction. Once they have hit bottom, there is only one direction to go, and that is up.

I wonder, if in some ways, as the Israelites experience God's departure from the temple, it was as if they had hit bottom. They finally had to come face to face with their culture, their history, and their actions. Perhaps it could be a turning point for them.

“Repentance” is the term we use in the church to speak of changing directions. Repentance includes an awareness of what we have done, regret for past actions, and a determination to start in a new direction. It is a turning away from that which destroys to that which brings life. It is admitting our sin, our idolatry, and our

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Browning from *Pippa Passes* <http://www.potw.org/archive/potw48.html>

<sup>2</sup> National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-facts-and-statistics>

<sup>3</sup> National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/2001-2002-survey-finds-many-recover-alcoholism-researchers-identify>

wandering from God, coupled with a desire to turn to God and God's ways. We don't talk about repentance much as we don't want to focus on guilt, pain, or mistakes and would rather focus on the positives in life. A carrot rather than a stick.

Yet here in Ezekiel we have a powerful judgement of the people, with the result that God's presence leaves the temple, which I see, at least in part, as a call to repentance. The good news is that the book of Ezekiel does not stop with the readings we have today. Spoiler alert here: In just a few chapters, we hear the Lord God declare, "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways... Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone ... Turn, then, and live." (Ezek 18:30-32)

I have no pleasure in the death of anyone... Turn and live.

Hitting bottom and consequent repentance, while painful and difficult, are ultimately good if they lead to new life. Changing directions can be a beautiful thing.

In the gospel of Luke, we heard the story of a woman described simply as "a sinner." Scandalously, she showed up uninvited where Jesus was having dinner, then proceeded to pour ointment on his feet and wash them with her tears. Simon, Jesus' dinner companion, was offended that a sinful woman would touch Jesus in this way. Jesus responds by acknowledging the beauty of the situation, with the comment that "her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love." (Luke 7:47) Her repentance and forgiveness led to great love.

The situations in which we may need to change directions are sometimes profound and sometimes modest, but rarely is it easy to acknowledge that the direction in which we are heading is the wrong one. Whether it is in a relationship, employment, volunteer commitment, or attitudes, there are times we need to courageously admit that we are in the wrong spot, we have hit a wall, and need to turn around. Just as we, as individuals, find ourselves in situations that must change, so the same is true for us, as members of institutions, communities, and nations. Sometimes a body of people must change its culture, direction, or attitudes. And if it is hard to do as individuals, it is more complex and challenging for a group.

When we find ourselves hitting bottom, as a community or an individual, perhaps we need to hear the Psalmist remind us

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. (Psalm 139:7-8)

According to Ezekiel, even though the presence of the Lord left the temple, that same presence came to the people in exile. So even when we are hitting bottom, even when we have to change directions, we can trust that God is with us, encouraging us, saying "Turn and live."

When we turn and live, then we may be able to join in singing the simple Shaker song:

To turn, turn will be our delight,

Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.<sup>4</sup>

Thanks be to God for the hope and gift of new life. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> "Simple Gifts" is a Shaker song written and composed in 1848 by Elder Joseph Brackett.