



### Golden Verse

*"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" 2 Corinthians 5:17*

Ezekiel, written by a prophet from the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., is arguably the most obscure, compelling, bizarre, damning, and hopeful book in all the Bible. Like Revelation, it is filled with bizarre, arcane visions difficult to interpret, so much so that ancient readers essentially warned people not to read it.

There is an old tale of a child who picked up a copy of the book of Ezekiel at his teacher's home and suddenly understood the true meaning of the extremely obscure and much-debated Hebrew word *hasmal* in chapter one verse twenty-seven which is meant to describe the very substance of God...Instantly, fire came out from the *hasmal* and incinerated him.

St. Jerome from the fourth century who gave us the Latin version of the Bible wrote, *"...The beginning and ending of Ezekiel ...are involved in so great obscurity that like the commencement of Genesis they are not studied by the Hebrews until they are thirty years old."*

It is Ezekiel's descriptions of God that prompted this treatment:

*and seated above the likeness of a throne was something that seemed like a human form. Upwards from what appeared like the loins I saw something like gleaming amber,*

*something that looked like fire enclosed all round; and downwards from what looked like the loins I saw something that looked like fire, and there was a splendor all round. Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all round. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. (Ezekiel 1:26-28)*

These descriptions of God help convey the central concern of this book, the sovereign glory of God.

It is critical to know that Ezekiel wrote this from exile in Babylon as the Israelites longed to return home. The state of exile fundamentally shaped the Israelites in this time. It was through exile that the notion of God's glory became so powerful because it felt so incredibly absent.

Rabbi and professor of Tamara Ezkenazi described this state:

*Exile. It is not simply being homeless. Rather, it is knowing that you do have a home, but that your home has been taken over by enemies. Exile. It is not being without roots. On the contrary, it is having deep roots which have now been plucked up, and there you are, with*

*roots dangling, writhing in pain,  
exposed to a cold and jeering world,  
longing to be restored to native and  
nurturing soil. Exile is knowing  
precisely where you belong, but  
knowing that you can't go back, not  
yet?*

There is a feeling akin to exile that many are feeling in our country today, like we have a home that we love but it has been taken over. Except it's more like an exile in place, in which you haven't left home but home has left you.

This exile is felt all around by diverse political and religious dispositions. Civic discourse has fallen to the altar of the machinery of the aggrieved. The shootings, so many horrific shootings, which I won't try to solve or lay blame on one particular group (for it's really all of us) are a symptom of a void in the heart of our country. And I think in some ways it is the same void from which Israel suffered.

In Ezekiel, God is furious at Israel for failing to properly honor the Lord's sovereign glory, that is why they are feeling its absence. That which has brought them joy, and pride, and hope, and life is gone.

And there is a particular reason God is especially angry in how His glory has been neglected for those dear to Him have been abused. The Shepherds of Israel have not only failed to protect the sheep, but the weakest sheep have been ravaged.

As God proclaims:

*You have not strengthened the weak,  
you have not healed the sick,  
you have not bound up the injured,*

*you have not brought back the strayed,  
you have not sought the lost,*

In our text today, God accuses the Shepherds, who represent the kings, of not only failing to protect the sheep, that is the people of Israel, but slaughtering them for their own benefit.

That is the feeling today. That there is a group of people in our country who, like the kings of Israel, are slaughtering the values we aspire to most greatly.

That everyone truly is equal.

That we are a country who has been made strong through the depth of our compassion.

And made weak when we do not embrace those values for everyone – as we failed to do for women, for African Americans, for Native Americans.

But at our core, we the people, especially the people of New York City, believe in what our great Statue of Liberty extols. Ironically on the plaque she is named, "Mother of exiles!" Mother to those who feel no home and no place. And this is what she proclaims echoing the words of Ezekiel, "*Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...*"

The power of this statement today is for all spiritual immigrants. It is for all of those who feel like exiles, all for whom God has a heart. And in all this clanging noise too often we fail to hear those crying out for love.

As Christians, this is what we believe will heal, our own broken hearts, the hearts

of those filled with hatred, and the hearts of those filled with despair. As Paul wrote:

*if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*Love never ends.*

And our path from exile begins with loving the weak, the sick, the injured, the strayed, and the lost.

Love as the answer to our ills certainly seems simplistic. But the Church, despite its waning over years, is still a tremendously broad and powerful institution. And love is an infinitely scalable commodity. If Christ's church throughout this country joined together with all people of compassion to love those who needed it most, indeed things could change just as they did through Jesus' love so long ago.

But this is not only an emotional love. It is a love of action. If each church in its area of influence found those most vulnerable sheep and loved them through addiction, homelessness, mental health challenges, and more, things could change. But it must

be as Paul describes, it must bear all burdens, it must insist on the way for others, the love must endure all challenges.

As a congregation we are called to do what can we do to offer this love to the most vulnerable sheep. So they may longer not feel they are in exile.

Tuesday Night Dinner Party is an incredible start. It is an act of selfless love not only seeking to feed the hungry but to nourish their souls through friendship and fellowship. And it very well may be God is preparing us to do so much more in this arena. For once in a church, we have more volunteers to make this ministry run than we need...for now. There may be many more God will call into Watson Hall to be fed in body, mind, and spirit. In fact, we should pray for them to come.

So we can reach out to these sheep close to God's heart and let them know someone cares, that someone is willing to do something for them, that they matter to us, to our city, and most of all to our God.

Like Israel we yearn to feel that God is on our side again. We would do well to heed the words of Abraham Lincoln. During the Civil War, he was purportedly asked if God was on his side. "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side," said the President, "my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right."

God's heart is with the weakest, most vulnerable sheep and in the end, in the midst of all the terror of Ezekiel, God promises that these sheep will be healed, fed, loved.

*"I will feed my sheep. I will rescue my sheep.  
I myself will search for my sheep. ...And I the  
Lord shall be their God."*

God makes it clear. In order to hallow the sovereign glory of God – central theme of this book, and in some ways the theme of the whole Bible, is done through loving these beloved sheep, in word, and in deed. Amen.