

Circle of Mercy Sermon
Ezekiel 2:8 – 3:11
September 10, 2017

“Hard Foreheads and Stubborn Hearts”
by Missy Harris

Prophets are a weird bunch of people. They did really abnormal things – as you just saw in Nancy’s retelling of the story of Ezekiel. We only used a short portion of Ezekiel’s story tonight where he ate the scrolls, but there are some other weird things that are also credited to him:

- He had a lot visions, or some would say, hallucinations.
- He was silent - unable to speak for a period of time – a hard lot for a prophet.
- He had a clay tablet depicting the fall of Jerusalem and he lay down on his side with an iron pan between himself and the clay tablet for 390 days, and then he rolled over and repeated this for another 40 days on his right side.
- He shaved his beard with a sword – divided the hair into thirds, setting 1/3 on fire, scattering 1/3 around the city and throwing the last 1/3 into the wind. He then sewed a few remaining hairs into his clothing.

There’s even more, but I’ll leave it there. If you take a closer look at Ezekiel, you’ll understand why some Jewish traditions only allowed people over thirty read it!

Prophets always had a difficult task that they were being instructed to do. The words that they were asked to deliver were often unpopular, to say the least. And, as was often the case, they were delivering these messages to a less than receptive group of people. Most of their time was spent dealing with groups and individuals who specialized in the human practice of hardened foreheads and stubborn hearts.

Ezekiel was no different. He was a prophet and a priest, living around the time of the fall of Jerusalem. Before he was recognized as a prophet, Ezekiel had already been living exile himself. He spent a lot of time telling the other exiles that Jerusalem would eventually fall, why that judgment was levied against the remnant that had remained in Jerusalem, and how those in exile were not immune to this same judgment. He was a very popular fellow around town. And after Jerusalem did fall, Ezekiel’s prophecies turned to focus on foreign countries, how the people would be restored and how what once had seemed dead, may in fact still have some life. Ezekiel had some hope sprinkled in there.

Ezekiel's initial focus was on the failure of the religious community to tell the truth. In a vision, a hand reached out to him and he was instructed to eat a scroll containing a message of woe and lamentation for the people. In reality, it was a funeral message – a message that death was coming. He was entrusted with the task of bearing this message, whether the people wanted to hear it or not, and most didn't. But we know, that death was not the final word. When Ezekiel ate the scroll and it filled his stomach, it was as sweet as honey in his mouth.

Ezekiel's message included a strong reminder that – the people needed more truth tellers. Ezekiel was to be one of those truth tellers. We also need more truth tellers. And, like the word Ezekiel delivered, the truth that needs to be told is not only about hurt and death and destruction. It's also a sweet word of hope.

We need more truth tellers. We need places where we can trust that the truth will be told – places where we know that we can come with the hurts of the world that we witness, where we can come with our own inner hurts that we don't even know how to name yet – places where we know that we can encounter a truth that bears witness to hope, a hope that we can carry with us. It is a hope that, if we are willing to go where it leads, will take us within our deepest selves, bringing us face to face with who we say we want to be and who we really are.

It's not an empty hope. It is hope borne out of the hurts of the world and our knowing that the hurting is not the final word. It requires us to believe in the possibility of a world where peace, mercy, equity and justice are the driving forces and the end goals. This hope requires us to act our way into a world that isn't here quite yet, but that we believe is possible. This hope is not easy. We're not always around to see the results of what we hope for, but our faith is not in what can be seen. Our faith is grounded in the assurance of what we can't necessarily see or know fully, but that we know deep in our bones to be true.

We know more truth about the injustices and horrors and violence that happen in the world than we often know what to do with. We may not need more truth about the powers that be, but we are not released from paying attention and responding.

We know these truths all too well when we look around at our cities and nation and beyond into other countries. We know the truth about foreign policies that seek to ensure our of sense exceptionalism. We know the truth about why the Dreamers and the DACA program have been used this week as a scapegoat to shift attention from other issues bearing down the leaders of our country. We know the truth about white supremacy and the goals that it perpetuates. We know the truth about

why the powers that be are considering rolling back the tenants of Title IX that are meant to protect victims of sexual assault.

Families are seeking refuge in lands unknown and unfamiliar, willing to risk their lives and the lives of their beloved children, in hope of a life better than what they have known. And around the world, these families are being met with hostility and fear, not the hospitality and openness that our faith requires of us.

DACA students and their families are now plunged into a six month period of intensified terror – not knowing their fates, after taking a risk and following the rules.

Victims of sexual assault are being threatened with exposure of their sexual history when they step forward to call out the ones who have perpetrated an assault on their bodies, while not requiring the same from the accused.

I could go on, but you know these issues and situations well. We don't have to look far to see the suffering and violence – the hurt. Many of you are on the front lines in our community – engaging with mothers and fathers who are terrified; children who can't be children because they are required to function as adults at much too young an age; youth who you are helping to cultivate different strategies for dealing with anger and deep wounds; young people who long to be the person God created them to be, while fearing the responses of their family and friends; people who fear that they are not doing enough – equating that fear with not being enough; people who allow their mistakes to define them; people who feel alone – even though they are surrounded by so many who love them fiercely.

We all know and walk in these moments with people. We walk in these moments ourselves and with each other. We recognize that these are not just moments we experience when we face outward, toward the world. These moments also take us to that place within ourselves where we discover the core of who we are.

As people of faith, we speak and live into these moments from a different frame of reference. Our frame of reference, does NOT come from desperately seeking ways to preserve power and wealth and how we can insulate ourselves from the hurts of the world or to avoid facing the consequences of our behaviors and actions that do harm to others. Our frame of reference as people of faith springs from a deeper source that acknowledges the beloved-ness of every single person (including ourselves) and challenges us to live out of that truth.

There were several things that caught my attention this week that landed in that intersection between human hurt and human hope.

First, there was Desmond Tutu's letter to Aung San Suu Kyi, his fellow Nobel Peace Prize winner, criticizing her silence about the suffering and ethnic warfare that is being perpetrated upon the Rohingya, a Muslim minority community in Myanmar. Tutu urged her to speak out, to respond to what "some have been calling 'ethnic cleansing' and others a 'slow genocide.'"

He came out of his "retirement" from commenting on public issues and appealed to the deeper hope that he has borne witness to in Aung San Suu Kyi, saying, "My Dear Sister: If the political price of your ascension to the highest office in Myanmar is your silence, the price is surely too steep. A country that is not at peace with itself, that fails to acknowledge and protect the dignity and worth of all its people, is not a free country. It is incongruous for a symbol of righteousness to lead such a country; it is adding to our pain . . . we pray for you to be courageous and resilient again. We pray for you to speak out for justice, human rights and the dignity of your people."¹

We need each other to remind us who we are at our best, especially in those times when we are not operating out of the best of who we are.

The next thing that caught my attention was a video clip of people at Riverside Church in New York City reading in quick succession all of the verses in the Bible that have anything to do with welcoming the stranger and offering hospitality to the foreigner among us. The video clips culminate in the final words of a sermon with Reverend Amy Butler saying, "This is an executive order. Amen."

Other executive orders are coming at us endlessly, and they are wearing us down. We need to be filling ourselves with these kinds of executive orders that serve as reminders of who we are called to be and who we have known ourselves to be when we are at our best.

Third, there was the image created by a French street artist known simply as JR. You might have seen this image in the news this past week. JR recounts that he woke up from a dream with an image that wouldn't let him go – a toddler peering curiously and playfully over the border wall between the United States and Mexico.

¹ Desmond Tutu's letter to Aung San Suu Kyi, September 7, 2017.

While talking with a woman in Tecate about the project, JR noticed her son standing in his crib, gripping the edge with his fingers, watching and listening to them. Later, he went back and asked the mother if he could photograph her child because the child reminded him of the one in his dream. He got to work after that, creating this 65+ foot structure, its unveiling just happening to coincide with this week's announcement about the ending of the DACA program, creating a six month period, adding yet another layer of hellish limbo for young people and their families, who are trying to do the right thing.



There are lots of different photos of JR's art floating around the internet. I was struck by one image in particular that makes the wall look like it was built out of sticks and Legos. In that particular image, it appears that the child could just topple the entire wall over with delight and laughter at any moment. If only it were that simple. But that little baby peering over the wall is a powerful reminder to us all that we are talking about human beings and their lives. May the ones with hardened foreheads and stubborn hearts have eyes to see.

I also kept coming back to Tyrone's sermon from last week. I remember him saying to me before the service, "I don't know. This is just one of those times when I've been given a word to speak that I do not want to speak." Tyrone, your words have held on and have not let me go over the course of this week. I have kept turning over and over your calling us all to find our way back to the center – to the core of Love that binds us together; to the core of Love that demands that we examine the parts of ourselves that we have let slip out of Love's grasp; to the core of Love that calls us to that place of transformation – where we begin to recognize how we subtly have started mirroring the very actions and attitudes and behaviors that we say break hearts when we witness them, out there – in the world around us.

I don't know about you, but with every troubling news story or event that makes its way to my eyes and ears and heart, I keep finding myself going down that familiar road trying to figure out how to do more, how to be more, how to make things happen, how to change this or that. I get caught in that loop so easily and so endlessly – in the illusion that is somehow all depends on me.

And, finally, there was this other moment – and this is where Tyrone's word and a conversation with Mahan from this past week started to morph together in such a way that I can't tell where one began and one ended – but it was the idea of our belovedness – how each one of us is a beloved child of God. And in our belovedness we must remember that while we are taking on the hurts and pains of the world that face us daily, that we also need to keep attending to our own inner work – and remembering who we are at our core – our central identity that moves us beyond “How am I going to get through this week?” (which remains important) toward “Who am I going to be this week? – How am I going to be transformed in a way that enables me to be my truest and best self?”

And when our conversation was over, Mahan read the first twelve verses from Psalm 139 to Nancy and me.

And it was in that moment my forehead softened and my heart became a little more supple, and I rested for a brief moment in the promise that I am enough – that we are enough.

Maybe I've been spending a little too much time with our friend Ezekiel, but in each of these moments I just described from this week I wanted nothing more than to roll up every single one – Desmond Tutu's loving and truthful letter, the voices from Riverside reading the scriptures that instruct us to welcome the stranger, the image of that beautiful baby looking over the border wall, Tyrone's sermon and Mahan's gentle reminder that we are enough – I wanted to roll up all of these things and consume them, to fill my stomach with them, to take them all in more fully than my eyes and ears and heart would allow.

I don't know if what I experienced this week really fits with the story of Ezekiel or not. But I do know this, in these moments last week, the woe and lamentation that seem to weigh so much, shifted ever so briefly to a sweetness and lightness, that reminded me that the Spirit is still at work. And maybe She is most especially at work when I am determined to keep the focus out there, someplace else, on someone else, calling be back to the center.

Friends, we know that institutions are failing. We know that structures and systems of power are falling away. We know that we have to keep engaging and responding. And we will.

We also know that we need something deeper than what we have depended upon in the past. We need places where we can come together and ask the questions of each other and ourselves that are not being asked in other places, that we've not asked in a long time, if ever. We need to keep our eyes and ears open for those moments that alert us to the promise that our God of extravagant love and abundant mercy is at work, making all things new – in the middle of the messiness of both the hurt and the hope of this world. We need to come to the places that help us answer the question: Who, at my very core, am I going to be this week?

If you're willing, I invite you to close your eyes, for just a moment. Put your feet on the ground. See if you can intentionally allow your forehead to soften your, just a little. See if you can open your heart a little wider. Take a few deep breaths and hear these words of assurance:

God, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O God, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. 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. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Psalm 139:1-12

Amen.