

Reclaiming our **FAITH**

hearing God through
the prophets

COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH FALL 2026 SERMON SERIES

Hard Heart or New Heart? A SERMON ON EZEKIEL 11:14-20

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“Ezekiel: Hard Heart or New Heart?” | Ezekiel 11:14-20 | The Rev. Jessica C. Scholten

“No prophetic testimony in the Hebrew Scriptures is as dramatic and disturbing as that of Ezekiel” (Sharp, 79). So opens Carolyn Sharp’s chapter on Ezekiel in her book, *Old Testament Prophets for Today*.

“What a brilliant and disturbing witness we have in the book of Ezekiel!” (127) she writes in another commentary, *The Prophetic Literature*.

I myself have been telling the tales of Ezekiel over the last few months, because it is bizarro. A few month months ago, Pastor Charlie challenged the Session to choose a prophet and read that book of the Bible, reflecting on its themes and meanings, in preparation for this series.

Friends, in hindsight, Obadiah is the best choice. Trust me on this - it’s only one chapter. Or even Jonah – we’ll get to Jonah next week. That’s only four chapters. There are a bunch of them with just a few chapters – Joel, Habakkuk, Zephaniah – all good choices. Did I choose any of those? No, no. I knew I had the sermon on Ezekiel, so that’s where I went. I mean, sure, it’s a little longer than the minor prophets, but it’s no Isaiah! Sixty-six chapters!

But Ezekiel is 48 chapters. And truthfully, I haven’t read it in one complete chunk since seminary, so I forgot how entirely odd it is. It starts out with a vision Ezekiel has sitting on the bank of a waterway in ancient Babylon called the Chebar. The book starts with a vision of angels with various faces on the same being, all on giant wheels with the sound of the tumult of an army surrounded by flames, with wings and eyeballs everywhere. Well, you get the picture.



This Christmas, don’t forget your biblically accurate angel for the top of your tree. (photo of crazy wings and eyes wreath)

Over the last few months, I’ve speculated aloud that maybe the prophet had astigmatism which is why he talks of angels and the bright and varied lights surrounding them. Maybe he had vision issues. He for sure had some mental health challenges.

Once he gets through the visions of angels and God feeding him a scroll so that he can ingest the words of God to then share them with the people, he starts out his ministry, first in silence and then moves to lying on his side for over a year – 390 days – 1 day for each year of Israel’s existence, and then the other side for over a month for Judah’s existence. This all might speak more to depression or catatonic trauma in addition to being a message from God.

There are several more ways Ezekiel shares God's message to the people using this fashion of street art – eating food cooked over dung bricks, shaving his beard with a sword and then burning a third of it while another third he chopped with the sword all over the city and the last third he scatters to the wind.

I considered starting out with a little street art theatrics right here, following Ezekiel's example of eat and drinking while shaking to demonstrate to God's people how they will tremble with fearfulness because of their unfaithfulness. Or, I could have laid on my side for the next year here up on the chancel: #WorldsLongestSermon Literally, the longest sermon in history.

If you read the entire book of Ezekiel, you too would notice its strangeness. But you also would notice some common prophetic themes of hope and despair, faithfulness and the importance of relationship to God. Like our passage this morning, the entire book is a reflection on *hardness* of heart – when we turn away from God or put other gods before the Lord our God, and a heart of flesh – of compassion, of loving relationship with God.

The year Ezekiel turned 30 – 593 BCE – should have been marked with celebration. It was the year he likely would have become a temple priest. Instead, it is the year God gives him that vision of angels while he is living in exile and staring in despair into the river.

Just a few years earlier, in the beginning stages of the Babylonian exile, he and his priestly family witnessed the Temple being ransacked by King Nebuchadnezzar's henchman. Imagine watching the Holy place of worship where God's people gathered and believed wholehearted was the very place God dwelled... imagine it being trashed and disrespected. The Temple in Jerusalem was the place where people traveled on pilgrimage to gather so they could feel even more close with their Creator. It held holy artifacts Ezekiel and his family cared for – and they were being looted or tossed aside. After witnessing this, Ezekiel and his family along with all the Temple priests and their families were part of the first group dragged from their homeland and banished from God's city. Imagine how heartbreaking and traumatizing it all would have been.

The year Ezekiel turned 50 should have been marked with celebration – the year he would have retired from the priesthood. (idea from Tankersly's Ezekiel study on Holy and Hope) Instead, Ezekiel's 50th birthday simply completed his two decades of service as a priest, coinciding with the completed prophecy that is the book of Ezekiel.

Our passage this morning combines the two main parts of Ezekiel. The first part consisting of the first five years of exile and the first 32 chapters prophesy to the terror and hopelessness that reflect the painful Babylonian exile of God's people through the final siege on Jerusalem. While the people have begun exile and the Temple has been ransacked, God speaks through Ezekiel, calling the people back to faithfulness. The next sixteen chapters reflect the fifteen years of hope God calls Ezekiel to share with the people for what is next, finding new life and new hearts in the midst of chaos and grief.

The seven verses we read earlier from Ezekiel 11 form a mini course in both the despair of exile and the hope of what is to come, of new resurrection life. This passage is a cautionary tale, a metaphor, and a guide for faithful living. This short passage is a summary of Ezekiel's full prophesy spanning those two decades of listening to God and sharing God's Word with the people. Sometimes the methods are strange, sometimes the whole thing seems a little like madness, sometimes his language and imagery is so strong, early rabbis argued this particular prophet should maybe not be entered into the canon of Scripture – the choices made of what to include in the Bible and what is extraneous or too beyond the pale to consider part of the index.

Let's start with this being a cautionary tale. Prophets are not seers; they do not have crystal balls or read tea leaves. They simply look at what God's people are doing and present what that will do to their relationship with

God. When the people are faithful, when they are adhering to the guidelines God has given for healthy living, they have a better chance of prospering. When they are ignoring God's statutes and therefore ignoring their *relationship* with God, they are out of synch with their Creator. The prophets don't just prophesy of their own observations; they stay close to God so that they are paying attention to what God is saying, listening for the Spirit's leading.

Well, Israel got itself into a real mess leading up to this exile. About a decade before the exile began, King Jehoiakim of Judah aligned himself with the political powers of the day in Egypt. When Egypt was defeated, God's people in Jerusalem become a target of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar.

The cautionary tale is that when God says don't have other gods, other beliefs, or other priorities other than having God first, I think we should believe that God means just that. Don't get wrapped up in politics just because it seems to give you some extra power.

Christian Nationalism follows some of these same problematic practices – putting love of the nation above love for God. We can support what is good in our country, be grateful for the good it provides, but even our founding fathers worked against entwining God and nation together.

Every time we prioritize nation or power or wealth or bloodlust over our love for God, our hearts harden a little more, until they no longer have space for compassion, love, care for the stranger, the widow, the outsider. The people and sometimes WE end up with calloused or hardened hearts that only going back to loving God with our whole heart can renew.

This passage is also that very metaphor – that a hardened heart, however it develops, leaves us hollow and distant from God. The most well-known passage from Ezekiel is that famous valley of dry bones. God leads Ezekiel in a vision to look over the dry old devastation that represents Israel – defeated, dead, dried up, and without hope. In that vision, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones – that God will put the bones together, join them with sinews and flesh, and breathe new life into them.

Ezekiel watches with amazement as those bones rattle together and the slain are granted new life.

If you feel like a pile of dry bones, if you weep in some sort of feeling of exile, if your heart is starting to solidify into stone because of grief or sin or loneliness, know that God is there to help renew your spirit. Pray for that renewal. Talk with me or Charlie or Megan about this longing and let us walk with you to renew your hope and to experience that new life in God. Sometimes it happens in prayer, in a meal, over coffee, in a recovery group, or through the sheer passage of time, but I promise you that our God is always desiring to breathe new life into us, always at work for resurrection.

Finally, this passage is a guideline for faithfulness. "I have been a sanctuary to them," God says through Ezekiel. As Christians, we don't have the understanding of God in one place like the Israelites did. For them, God was often geographically tied to place. God was on the mountain where Moses was with God and received the 10 Commandments. God was in the pillar of cloud and fire they followed through the desert. God's presence was in the tabernacle that traveled with them through the desert, and eventually God's presence was in the Temple's Holy of Holies. How then does one understand where God is when one is in exile, banished from God's very presence?

Instead, God reminds the people – I am your sanctuary. I am with you wherever you go. I am with you in exile. I am with you in your home. I am with you. I am with you.

We need this reminder as well. We gather here in this sanctuary for worship, to be fed at the table, to remember, to

pray together and for one another, to be nourished and strengthened, to learn. And then we go out to all the places where God's presence also is – in our homes, our workplaces, in the faces of strangers, with our neighbors, and in our hearts.

The world can make our hearts cold... stones if you will. Then we gather and experience the presence of God here where our hearts are renewed back to flesh. And then we go out to experience the presence of God out in the world when we share our bread with the hungry and when we, with tender hearts, care for our neighbors.

Ezekiel asks the people of God: how is your heart? I wonder how your heart is. Has it hardened in some way, through some anger or hurt? Hear God's words through Ezekiel:

"I will give them one heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God."

God's invitation is always extending to you, always inviting you back home, where you are beloved and where you can return to the person God created you to be. I don't think we need dramatic street theatre – we just need the steady, repeated reminder that you are a beloved child of God, called to faithful living with a loving heart. May it be so. Amen.