

Week of March 29: Envisioning New Life

Teresa Edwards

Ezekiel 47:1-12

When you visit the Tennessee Aquarium, you enter by way of a very tall escalator. At the top, the exhibit takes you on the journey of the Tennessee River, beginning at its mountaintop source and making its way into a great moving body of water. You start at the top and move down the mountain with the river exploring its life. In today's lesson, Ezekiel encounters a river that begins as a trickle flowing from the rebuilt Temple and becomes a mighty river which refreshes everything it touches. Our key verse says it all. "Everything will live where the river goes." (Ezekiel 47:9)

Water

You and I can't live without water. Water makes life possible, nourishing our bodies and souls. "In a desert, water is precious. After a disaster, finding clean water becomes a necessity. During illness, water cleanses and soothes. In everyday life, water supports the growth of plants for food. But in the Bible, water symbolizes God's gracious gift of life." (The New International Lesson Annual, Nan Duerling) In this last vision of the book of Ezekiel, water flows from the renewed Temple out into the world, bringing life. Ezekiel wades and swims that river, telling us a story of hope and a future for the exiles who thought that their future disappeared when they left Jerusalem.

Water serves as a powerful symbol throughout scripture. In Genesis, Psalms, John and Revelation, images of water help us to recognize God's life giving spirit. From the rivers in the Garden of Eden to the river that flows from the throne of God in Revelation, God gives water to refresh and renew the people, then and now. This is good news, because we are a thirsty people indeed. Our thirst comes in so many forms. We give our life away daily in the world and come home to find ourselves dried out from lack of self care, busyness, and mixed up priorities. With parched spirits, we turn to God, longing to drink from that river of life. Is there hope for us too in that healing water?

The river of God holds the power to create, to restore and to redeem. All of us are nurtured in the water of the womb and made new by the waters of baptism. The power of life giving water does not stop there. Let us seek the grace to ask for what our dry souls need: the living waters of God. "Fill my cup, Lord. I lift it up, Lord. Come and quench this thirsting of my soul. Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more. Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole."

Trees and Fish

After Ezekiel's guide shows him the beauty and power of the river, the two walk along its bank. Ezekiel sees those amazing trees that "will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear, because the water nourishes them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing." (Ezekiel 47:12) Any farmer would desire such a tree, a tree that bears fruit every month without fail, a tree whose leaves hold medicinal power. The bank of this river is covered with

these trees, giving life away with the snap of a piece of fresh fruit from the branch.

From the river bank, Ezekiel sees the fish, too many to count. This water teeming with fish flows into stagnant seas and makes it fresh once more. Even the Dead Sea fills with life. All the places this water travels, swarms of life emerge. Fishermen cast nets from the river banks, expecting a great catch. They are not disappointed.

The scene sounds idyllic, like something out of a painting. God paints this scene for the exiles and for us. Its beauty lies in its abundance. The fruit comes not just in season, but all year long. The fish teem in the river of God. Our God does not hold back his blessing from the people. Just the opposite, God offers life at its best, promising their restoration to their land, the Temple and their own spirits. We are invited to join the exiles along this river bank. The hope that they embraced is ours to embrace. The promise of life they claimed is ours to claim. We claim it in Jesus, who came offering living water. Like the exiles and the woman at the well, we must choose to receive the gift, offered in abundance and love.

Life

In the board game Life, you never know what will happen next. You make the choice to play. You spin the wheel. You deal. That's Life. The exiles knew about life. Living in captivity, reminded daily of their sin and disobedience, they yearned for a faithful and joyful life. They wanted to return home, to their land, the Temple and covenant life with God. Ezekiel's vision offers hope that their dream might become a reality. You and I know all too well about life. It does not turn out as we plan. Yet our dream of a restored life becomes a reality in Jesus, who offers us the living water so we will never be thirsty again.

In youth, we sang a song I still remember today. "I've got a river of life flowing out of me, makes the lame to walk and the blind to see, opens prison doors, sets the captives free, I've got a river of life flowing out of me." Through Ezekiel's prophecy, the hope of that river flowed in the people. In Christ, that river flows in us. Stand on its bank, drink in its life, for "where the river flows everything will live."(Ezekiel 47:9b)

The Rev. Teresa Love Edwards is the Minister of Adult Discipleship at Forest Hills United Methodist Church in Macon. She can be reached at teresaedwards@foresthillsmacon.com

Week of April 5: Suffering Unto Death

Teresa Edwards

Luke 23:32-46

Today's lesson will be taught on Palm or Passion Sunday, both the same day but with a different focus. Our churches love Palm Sunday. Children wave the palms and everyone sings Hosanna. To embrace Passion Sunday requires us to pay attention to all that happens to Jesus between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. Choosing to make that journey is imperative to grasp the depth of love that Jesus offers each of us through the cross.

Choices

Each Gospel reveals Jesus' passion in its own way. Luke includes the conversation between the two criminals and Jesus as they hung on the cross together. In addition to the criminals, Luke considers the leaders who accused Jesus and the soldiers who crucified him. Each chose to respond differently to Jesus' crucifixion.

The Leaders

What do leaders do? They lead and in this case they lead in the scoffing: "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" (Luke 23:35) These Jewish leaders who accused Jesus and sought his life seem to be winning, so they think. Even though they got their desired result, Jesus condemned to death and hanging on a cross, it is still not enough. At the crucifixion, they seize one more chance to strike another blow with their venomous words. They scoff at Jesus, not realizing that their words bear the truth. Why do these leaders feel the need to hurl insults at Jesus? For some winning is never enough until their opponent is humiliated. The leaders' choice to respond in this way spoke volumes about their character and integrity. In 2007, a little league team from Warner Robins won the World Championship game. They played hard. The team from Tokyo played hard. Warner Robins took home the prize. It would have been easy for those young men to rub their victory in their opponents face. Instead they reached out in kindness and friendship to the heartbroken players after the game. These young men made a different choice which conveyed much about their character and integrity too. You and I, when tempted to elevate ourselves and in turn humiliate others in small or big ways, must make this same choice. Whose example will we follow?

The Soldiers

Next, the soldiers who crucify Christ mock him. "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" (Luke 23:37) Earlier these same soldiers cast lots for his clothing, gambling for his last earthly possessions. Attempting to take his dignity from him, the soldiers assume a cruel role of abusive power. Abusive power aims at stripping away human dignity, little by little, until nothing of our spirit remains. The soldiers, just like the leaders, seek to humiliate Jesus, to make Jesus look small and weak so that they look big and strong. Stripping Jesus of his clothing

and offering him sour wine on a branch, Jesus is left naked and unable to even take a drink to quench his thirst without assistance. In *He Chose the Nails*, Max Lucado points out that Jesus put on instead the indignity of nakedness, failure and sin. Not knowing what Jesus does for them, the soldiers taunt the Savior who wore their sin.

Do we mock Christ in our own way by choosing ourselves at the expense of another? When position, power and personal rights count more than compassion and the needs of other people, we lose our ability to see anyone but ourselves. Our choices reveal the state of our soul. What do our choices say about what lies in our hearts?

The Criminals

Jesus does not die alone. Two criminals die along side him, their three crosses marking the landscape of our souls since that day. These criminals “were Zealots, revolutionaries using any and all means to expel the Romans from Palestine.” (Adult Bible Study Teacher Book) All three presented threats to Rome and were sentenced to death.

As the scene at the cross escalates, one of the criminals cries out in utter disdain: “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us.” (Luke 23:39) In these words of blasphemy and bitterness, this condemned man revealed a hardened heart. Hanging next to Jesus, the chosen one, he chose sarcasm and hatred. He chose to humiliate Jesus too. Like the penitent criminal, I want to ask: “What is wrong with you? Can’t you see Jesus at your side?” For this criminal, death came as a final judgment.

The other criminal, often referred to as the penitent thief, made another choice. He makes a simple request of Jesus: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” (Luke 23:40-42) This criminal recognized that Jesus offered another reality more powerful than the reality of his imminent death: grace, faith and a life with God in paradise.

The two criminals each made a choice. “Isn’t this the reminder of Calvary’s trio? Ever wonder why there were two crosses next to Christ? Ever wonder why Jesus was in the center? Could it be that the two crosses on the hill symbolize one of God’s greatest gifts? The gift of choice.” (He Chose The Nails, Max Lucado)

Each person who encountered Christ on the cross made a choice. This Holy Week, all of us must take in the gravity and beauty of the cross and make a choice. May the words of this prayer be our guide: Lord, help us to put aside our petty ways and our need to be right, our desire to be number one at all costs and to exercise control over others. May we look away from our selfish hearts to see you there, hanging on the cross for us. Amen