

Sermon Notes



Series: Changed for Good

Sermon: In a Strange Land

Ezekiel 1-2 (selections)

In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin), the word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the Lord was on him there. As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber. In the middle of it was something like four living creatures.

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. When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me.

Monday: Read Genesis 37:1-33; 50:15-21

While Joseph's brothers tried to murder him by throwing him in a pit, their jealousy and envy seem somewhat justified by Joseph's holier-than-thou recounting of dreams in which he is lord and king over his brothers, and their father's preference for their little brother is made clear. Joseph, in an even more bizarre set of circumstances, finds himself governor over the land of Egypt when his brothers come looking for food during the famine, and thus a family divided by strife and rivalry is reunited. In what began as a terror-filled betrayal by those who should love him most, Joseph's journey from Canaan to Egypt becomes a story of God's faithful presence with all of Israel. In what ways have the experiences and circumstances of your life shaped you? Your relationship with family? With God? In what ways have you experienced God's faithfulness in those situations?

Prayer: God, remind me of your faithful presence in all the moments of my day. Amen.

Tuesday: Read 1 Kings 19:1-15

Discouragement can be a devastating feeling. We all go through times of loneliness and despair for so many different reasons. Life can beat us up and we often feel that no one understands or cares. We may even think that God has forsaken us if we have not recognized God around us in a long time. Like Elijah, we are done. Done with all of it. It's too hard and we just want to give up. But God is not done with Elijah. And God is not done with us. That is everything. In our despair God offers nourishment for the journey; in our misery God whispers a word of love, in our isolation God says, "There's more." Recall a time when you were "done." What were those circumstances? How were you nourished on the journey? In what ways is God inviting you to do and be more?

Prayer: May the sound of sheer silence remind me that you are here. Amen.

Wednesday: Read Esther Chapter 4:1-17

The story of Esther is a complicated one. In Judaism, the story is the heart of the festival of Purim ("lots"), a festival characterized by joy and feasting and usually the presentation of a play based on the tale, often done by children, dramatizing the division of the world into evil and good. Evil is the character Haman, a Persian official who detests the Jews of his country and who is hanged on the very gallows he had built for his archenemy, Mordecai, uncle of the beautiful Esther. She and her uncle are the good Jews who, through risk and pluck and with the help of the wine-soaked, slightly stupid king, are able to save the Jews from destruction. It is a story that provides hope in the midst of despair for Jews and for us. Mordecai's words to Esther in verse 14, "If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place... Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this," kindle a spark of hope reminding us that all is not lost. All of us, in whatever exile we find ourselves, need stories like Esther's to remember that God is always near. When have you found yourself without hope? In what ways do you see Esther's story in our world today? How can Mordecai's words inspire you to hope, and your hope to action?

Prayer: Faithful God, remind us that we, too, are here for such a time as this. Amen.

Thursday: Read John 1:6-23

To give witness is to break silence. It is to let go of what the response might be and just do it because you have to; it is to acknowledge that you cannot NOT testify to how you have experienced God in your life; when you see God at work; when you know God is by your side. Witnessing is not easy, especially these days. John reminds us that, "Behold!" will need to be uttered again and again. Our witness is then added to the chorus of other voices, so that those who have already testified do not feel alone and so that those who have yet to testify feel empowered. Giving witness to the light is not al-

ways comfortable, and is sometimes very painful. But, it insists that the light will indeed shine, always overcoming the darkness. How do you bear witness to God at work in your life? How can your experience, your life, and your voice testify to the Christ who is hope for every person?

Prayer: Jesus, may we be your witnesses to the ends of the earth. Amen.

Friday: Read Acts 9:1-20

They heard the voice but saw no one. What a dramatic scene, right? Yes, we know this as Saul's story but the folks around him are on this roller coaster of a journey too. The men with Saul also heard the voice but saw no one. His companions would now have to lead him by the hand. Their fearless leader, now being led around like a child. Then the story turns to Ananias. One of the faithful followers of the Way. He hears a voice too. He has no need to see someone. He knows the voice. Presumably, he has heard this voice before. The Lord says, "Go." Ananias goes. It's not just Saul's story. The story is about two worlds colliding because people listen for voices, hear voices and follow voices. Sometimes we find ourselves in strange places... and sometimes God's voice is most clear when we're uncomfortable and disturbed. In what ways can you relate to Saul? The men with Saul? Ananias? How might God be calling you to respond to disruption or discomfort in your life?

Prayer: God, open my eyes that, like Paul, I might see you. Amen.

Saturday: Read Psalm 137

The question is not whether the things that happen to us are chance things or God's things because, of course, they are both at once. Frederick Buechner says, "There is no chance thing through which God cannot speak ... God speaks, and the words God speaks are incarnate in the flesh and blood of ourselves and of our own footsore and sacred journeys... 'Be not afraid, for lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.'" God says God is with us on our journeys. God says God has been with us since each of our journeys began. God says God will be with us always and forever. How have your experienced God speaking in and through the journey of your life? In what ways do those experiences strengthen and encourage you? How can you hold that hope in the midst of anxiety, suffering, and hardship?

Prayer: Help me, Lord to sing your song no matter where I am. Amen.