

THE LIFE OF EZEKIEL - THE FALLOUT
A SERMON BASED ON EZEKIEL 5:1-17
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, JANUARY 22, 2017
10:00 a.m.

Uh oh.

This isn't good.

This is bad.

This is really bad.

This is one of those passages in the Bible,
that gets left out of the lectionary
that three year schedule of Bible readings many churches use.

This is one of those passages in the Bible,
that preachers smarter than me avoid,
like the plague.

It contains what I consider to be one of the most frightening verses

I have seen in the Bible.

This is what the Sovereign Lord says,

'I myself am against you, Jerusalem.'

I myself am against you.

I will inflict punishment on you in the sight of the nations.

I will do what I have never done before and will never do again.

I will inflict punishment on you and scatter all your survivors to the winds.

I myself will shave you.

I will not look on you with pity or spare you.

A third of your people will die of the plague or perish by famine.

A third will fall by the sword outside your walls.

A third I will scatter to the winds and pursue with drawn sword.

I will make you a ruin and reproach among the nations.

When I shoot at you with my deadly and destructive arrows of famine,

I will shoot to destroy you.

Plauge and bloodshed will sweep through you,

and I will bring the sword against you.

I the Lord have spoken.

It's not good.

All you have to do is look at Ezekiel to know it's not good.

Do you remember back in 2012 when the movie version of Les Mis was made starring Hugh Jackman and Anne Hathaway?

Something that made the movie unique was that it was filmed with the singing done live.

Usually in a musical these days,

the singing is done ahead and the actors lip sync the songs.

But this movie took the unusual approach
of filming with the actors singing live.

But singing wasn't the only thing that was filmed as live action.

Anne Hathaway played the character of Fantine,

a woman who turned to prostitution

in order to support her daughter.

eventually had to then sell her teeth, then her hair.

Anne Hathaway was an actress who could be recognized

for her luxuriant, rich, deep long brown hair.

Nicola Sloane was the actress who played the 'hair crone'

was entrusted with the task of cutting off Anne's hair for the film.

She shared in an interview,

“We blu- tacked a razor blade against a knife blade
and I held the two together and you have to saw away at it
that’s the only way to get it off.”

Anne Hathaway says about the experience,

It was done and I took a few beats and then looked into the mirror.
I wept uncontrollably.

“I realised I couldn’t take it back,” she says.

“It had the effect of changing my identity.

I was reduced to a mental patient level of crying...

I was inconsolable.”

“I called my husband and was on the phone with him.

I looked in the mirror and I said ‘I look like my gay brother.

I’m just Man Hathaway’.”

She said having her hair cut off for Les Mis,

was quite literally the hardest moment of her career.

“I put it up there with the most difficult things I’ve ever had to do,
which I wasn’t expecting.

I didn’t think I was that vain.

“There was nothing I could do to prepare for it.

You train a stunt, you train your voice, you sing the song.

“This was just letting it happen

and accepting whatever the results were going to be.”¹

All you have to do is look at Ezekiel to know it’s not good.

A prophet of God,

who typically has the beard and the hair of Gandalf,

whose wild hair and big beard would carry the authority

of an elder, a teacher, a rabbi, a prophet,

well, the prophet was now bald

left with all the skin redness and irritation and cuts

that come from being shaved by a sword.

Ezekiel was reduced from the Charlton Heston Moses’

and that authority of God,

to what would feel like the authority of a baby gerbil in comparison.

Shaving his head was a moment of shame,

of humiliation, of loss of identity, of loss of authority and

¹ <http://hollywoodlife.com/2013/01/24/anne-hathaway-haircut-les-miserables-scene-cut-hair-short-hacked/>

loss of purpose.

But you say, it's just hair.

It is. Except when it's not.

Anne Hathaway can tell you,

it's just hair,

until it's gone

and it changes your identity.

In biblical times

to shave your head was a sign of mourning,

a sign of shame and dismay,

a sign that you had been cut off.

Samson's hair being cut was

a sign of his disconnection from God.

With his hair cut, he lost his power.

The tearing of clothes, the rending of garments,

was a sign of ritual nudity

pointing to exposure and embarrassment.

Fasting was a sign of premature dying.

So it's just hair.

Except when it's not.

Ezekiel was already the weird guy lying on his side
with the iron pan between him and the clay brick
with some sort of map on it.

Now as well as having behaviour that was out of place,
he looked out of place.

Ezekiel took his hair and weighed it in front of everyone, thirds.

He burned a third of his hair inside his model clay city.

A third of his hair he put on the ground all around his clay city
and chopped it, like you would with a meat cleaver,
or like those chefs who can chop onions really fast.

The last third he threw into the air,
and then chased it through the air with his sword.

He caught a couple of hairs, tucked them into his belt.

But then took a few of those and threw them into the fire.

Then, for these people watching him and shaking their heads,

for these people of Israel living in exile,

for these people captured by Babylon and taken away

to live as captives in a foreign land,

for these people who felt themselves to be God's chosen

because God's temple was in the centre of their land

because God's temple was in Jerusalem,

for these people

hairless, shamed, mourning Ezekiel had this message,

pointing to the clay city and the burnt hair,

This is what the Sovereign Lord says,

'This is Jerusalem!'

This is not Babylon.

This is not Nineveh.

This is not Damascus or Cairo.

This is not the land of the Philistines,

the Hittites or the Amorites.

This is not Israel's enemies.

This is Jerusalem.

This is the centre of the nations
with countries around her.'

Don't think you are spared.

Don't think you are immune because my temple is there.

Don't think you have special favour.

This is what the Sovereign Lord says,

"I myself am against you."

"I will inflict punishment on you in the sight of the nations."

"I will do to you what I have never done before
and will never do again."

I myself will shave you.

A third of your people will die of the plague or perish by famine.

A third will fall by the sword outside your walls.

A third I will scatter to the winds and pursue with drawn sword.

This is not the Bible passage
which inspired the hymn,
'Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild'

Here in this Scripture,
we have one of the clearer examples of the wrath of God,
that infamous Old Testament God everyone tries to avoid,
and never invites over because he's negative, cranky
and a real killjoy to be around.

We don't know what to think about a wrathful God.

Many in this progressive era of individual rights,
would stand in judgement of a God who judges.

Weirdly, they often don't see the irony in that statement.

But more than standing in judgement,
they become dismissive of such a God.

Timothy Keller,

in his book 'A Reason for God' writes,

"In Christianity, God is both a God of love and of justice.

Many people struggle with this.

They believe a loving God can't be a judging God.

Like most other Christian ministers in our society,

I have been asked literally thousands of times,

'How can a God of love

be also a God filled with wrath and anger?

If God is loving and perfect,

he should forgive and accept everyone.

God shouldn't get angry.

Keller says,

"I always start my response by pointing out

that all loving persons are sometimes filled with wrath,

not just despite of,

but because of, their love.

If you love a person, and you see someone ruining them -

even if it is they themselves - you get angry.

Keller quotes Becky Pippert

"Think how we feel when we see someone we love

ravaged by unwise actions or relationships.

Do we respond with benign tolerance

as we might toward strangers?

Far from it.... Anger is not the opposite of love.

Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference.

God's wrath is not a cranky explosion,

but his settled opposition to the cancer...

which is eating out the insides of the human race

he loves with his whole being.

The Bible is saying that God's wrath flows

from his love and delight in his creation.

He's angry at evil and injustice

because it is destroying its peace and integrity."

Miroslav Volf, a Christian theologian from Croatia,

used to reject the concept of God's wrath.

He thought that the idea of an angry God was barbaric,

completely unworthy of a God of love.

But then his country experienced a brutal war.

People committed terrible atrocities

against their neighbours and countrymen.

The following reflections, from Volf's book [Free of Charge](#),

reveal his new understanding of the necessity of God's wrath:

“My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath

was a casualty of the war

in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come.

According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed

and over 3,000,000 were displaced.

My villages and cities were destroyed,

my people shelled day in and day out,

some of them brutalized beyond imagination,

and I could not imagine God not being angry.

Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century,

where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days!

How did God react to the carnage?

By doting on the perpetrators in a grandfatherly fashion?

By refusing to condemn the bloodbath

but instead affirming the perpetrators' basic goodness?

Wasn't God fiercely angry with them?

Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath,

I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God

who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil.

God isn't wrathful in spite of being love.

God is wrathful because God is love.”

The apostle Paul describes the wrath of God

in his letter to the church in Rome.

He says,

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven

against all the godlessness and wickedness of people,

who suppress the truth by their wickedness,

since what may be known about God is plain to them,

because God has made it plain to them.

For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities –

his eternal power and divine nature –

have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made,
so that people are without excuse.”

And here Paul points to the crux, the centre, the focal point,
the point from which the wrath of God emanates.

For although they knew God,
they neither glorified him as God
nor gave thanks to him,
but their thinking became futile
and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Although they claimed to be wise,
they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God
for images made to look like a mortal human beings.

There it is in utter, transparent simplicity.
The seed of evil, the ultimate cause of wrath.
For although they knew God,
they neither glorified him as God

nor gave thanks to him.

Their thinking became futile
and their foolish hearts were darkened.

When you listen to Miroslav Volf,

and think of Croatia, and Rwanda, or any other of humanity's horrors
God's wrath makes sense, has some weight.

Even when you listen to Timothy Keller, or Becky Pippert,

on a smaller scale,
we can understand wrath against things that
harm those we love.

But what we don't hear, what we have trouble seeing and comprehending,

are the instances when it is our sin that is causing the harm
when it is our sin that is bringing wrath.

No one of us want to believe in a God who can get angry then.

We want a merciful, benign, somewhat lazy God
in those situations.

Mark Buchanan in his book 'The Holy Wild'

asks the question,

‘What initially sparks God’s anger?

What is the root sin, the molten core of wickedness and godlessness
that convinces God to turn us over?’

We can think of horrible things.

Turn on the news,

it isn’t hard to find an outrage of the month
leading to the atrocity of the year.

We can think of really hurtful behaviour in the lives of family and friends.

Surely these are the kinds of things that are the spark
that lead to the flame of God’s wrath.

But it’s not what you think it would be.

It’s not a distant, horrid, frightening, weighty sin,
that sparks us to annihilation.

The spark is here in Romans.

Although they knew God,

they neither glorified him as God

nor gave thanks to him,
but their thinking became futile
and their foolish hearts were darkened.

The heart of wickedness

the seed of godlessness is frightening in its ease of planting.

It is a refusal to glorify God.

It is a refusal to thank him.

Buchanan writes,

‘All the wickedness in the world begins with the act of forgetting.’

Listen to Ezekiel as he gives voice to God’s frustration.

It’s the frustration with a people who have forgotten,

or refused,

to glorify and thank God.

God says,

I set Jerusalem in the centre of the nations.

But she rebelled against my laws and decrees

more than the countries around her.

She rejected my laws and has not followed my decrees.
You have been more unruly than the nations around you.
You haven't even conformed to their standards.
So I myself am against you.
I myself will shave you.
I will not look on you with pity or spare you.

In Romans, the wrath of God is shown
when God no longer holds his people back
from barrelling down the path they insist on taking.

When they refuse to glorify God
when they refuse to thank God
when they refuse the path set out for them
by the God who loves them and cares for them
when this happens, God lets go.

In Romans, Paul uses the phrase, he gives them over.
He gave them over to the sinful desires of their hearts.
He gave them over to shameful lusts.
He gave them over to a depraved mind,

so that they do what ought not to be done.

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness,
evil, greed and depravity.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice.

They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent,
arrogant and boastful.

They invent ways of doing evil.

They have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.

And although they know God's decree,
they continue on anyway.

It is God's mercy that holds us back from destroying ourselves.

It is in listening to God that individuals and families and nations are spared,
spared from their own selfishness and heartlessness.

There is a tremendous fallout on a path apart from God,
a path that doesn't include glorifying or thanking God.

Because if God is love,

and God has embodied that love in Jesus

and you are moving away from him,
then you are moving away from true love.

There is a tremendous fallout in refusing to glorify God.

There is tremendous fallout in refusing to thank God.

There is tremendous fallout in forgetting the God who loves you.

It's not just hair.

It's everything.

It's who you are, where you belong, where you are going.

Thankfully, the antidote to this fallout is a simple cure.

And ending the wrath of God is frightfully easy.

Glorify God,

Give thanks to God,

Worship God, and listen to God

and you'll keep your head.

Amen.

