

Ezekiel 36: 26

A New Heart

Faith You Can Fit in Your Pocket #2

February 25, 2018

During the season of Lent, Pastor Abby and I are preaching through a series titled, "Faith You Can Fit in Your Pocket." Each week we will focus on one verse that is a helpful guide for Christian living, or that provides a hopeful image for us. The verse will be printed on the bulletin so you can take it and literally place it into your pocket. These are verses worth memorizing, if you are so inclined. Last week's verse was Micah 6:8 "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." This week we have a promise of "a new heart" and a "new spirit," of God replacing "a heart of stone" with a "heart of flesh."

When we think about this verse only, out of context, we are invited to think personally. This verse points to God's activity of inner transformation, what encounters with the Sacred will do for us: new heart, new spirit, renewal, resurrection. I've been thinking about the moments this week and moments in my life when I felt a heart of stone crumbling away and being replaced with something human.

On Friday of this week, my family and I went sledding. We hadn't gone sledding yet this winter. We got everyone together, we grabbed our sleds, went to the hill, and the snow was great and the day was beautiful, and we played. There was no purpose, there was no goal, it was just fun. It was pure gift. I felt renewed.

We've been watching the Olympics as a family, and like much of Minnesota and the United States, we've been watching the clip of Minnesota native Jessie Diggins win the first Cross Country skiing gold medal ever for the United States, but especially listening to the call of Duluth's Chad Salmela as he was part of NBC's commentary team for this race. We've been listening to this clip over and over again. "Here comes Diggins, Here comes Diggins!! Yes! Yes! Yes! As she crosses the finish line. If you haven't watched it, you must look it up and experience it. We've been laughing and crying as we've been watching it. There's something so moving about hearing someone so enthusiastic and so excited for someone else, and

communicating so clearly that somehow we are in this together . As we watched this, I felt a heart of flesh returning to me.

I've also been thinking about a season of grief in my life, when my family and I were grieving a traumatic death. I couldn't concentrate. I couldn't sleep. The weight of grief was like a stone in the center of my life. Slowly though, I was brought back to life, a heart of flesh returned to me.

I believe that God is present in these sorts of experiences. I think God does what this verse says, "replacing a heart of stone with a heart of flesh."

When we pay attention to the passage around this verse in Ezekiel, we realize that there is something deeper and richer going on too.

In the passage that surrounds this verse, Ezekiel is sharing that God is not pleased. The people are in exile, they are scattered. God wants to bring them home, but God is concerned about their idolatry.

I'm going to try to explain the worldview of the prophets for a little bit, so hang with me.

For the prophets, the concern about idolatry is a concern about values. The prophets are nervous about the worship of other gods because the fear is that worshipping other gods will distract leaders and the people from what is most important: Love of neighbor. Jesus affirms this in the Great Commandment, "love God, love neighbor, that's the law and the prophets. When one is devoted to Yahweh, to God, this will lead to neighbor love. Neighbor love leads to human flourishing, everything starts working better. In the Bible, images of loving the neighbor and justice are often accompanied by images of abundance from the land. When the people are devoted to Yahweh, and loving the neighbor, then it is like the universe and creation start working in your favor.

In contrast, when leaders and the people start worshipping other gods, when their devotion starts going in the wrong directions, then the people lose track of neighbor love. In the worldview of the prophets, when people and leaders of ancient Israel stop loving the neighbor,

it's like the whole universe starts working against them. Creation doesn't work well anymore, their life together doesn't work well, nations become adversaries, everything falls apart. The Bible talks about this as God's judgment, and the prophets say that Israel is in exile because of God's judgment, because of idolatry and failure to love the neighbor. The actual history is more complicated than this story the prophets tell, but I do hear some wisdom in what the prophets are saying.

I think this is true: we are easily distracted as people, and we give attention and devotion to things that are less than ultimate. When we are pulled away from home, from our center, and stop loving the neighbor, stop noticing how we are connected to one another, it's like the world starts breaking apart.

In our verse for today, God desires to gather the people, like a mother hen gathering her brood, but then God wants to give the people a heart transplant. A new heart, a new spirit. The Hebrew for heart can also be translated "mind, will, understanding." God wants to put an entirely new inner life in place for the people. All for the sake of compassion for others. That's all God wants, and that compassion is key for human lives and creation to start working well again.

Like so many of us, I've been following all that has been happening in the wake of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL.

Today's verse and passage from Ezekiel has me seeing this through the lens of idolatry. I've been asking, "what is that we hold sacred, anyway?" "To what and to whom are we really devoted?" Are we devoted to one another and to human lives, or are we devoted to our weapons? As the prophets proclaim their concern about misplaced devotion, and how it turns us from our neighbors, I'm all ears this week.

I've been troubled again by the logic of so many: trying to solve the problem of gun violence with more guns that do violence.

But, as Ezekiel promises a new heart and a new spirit, removal of a heart of stone and the implanting of a heart of flesh for a people, I wonder if we are beginning to see that too, as

youth are leading the way. This week, the youth from Parkland High School, decided not to wait for adults to lead, not to be satisfied with adults refusing to lead, and they have focused the emotion of their grief in standing for their friends who lost their lives, in standing for one another and for students all across this nation, organizing Never Again, and so many other efforts have spun off from this. They have been standing bravely and fiercely in front of lawmakers, taking on some of the most powerful forces in our nation.

Parkland senior Dimitry Hoth described to the press and to lawmakers the horror of the attack and then he said, "When did politics and money from the NRA become more important than our lives? NRA we're not afraid of you. You won't silence us. Never again."

Student David Hogg was interviewed on Fox News. David asked what could be more non-partisan than saving students lives. The interviewer asked him what he had to say about Donald Trump doing more to address gun violence than any other president before him. He said, "I don't know actually." Then Hogg started talking about gun control again. The interviewed closed by saying that we are praying for you. Hogg said, "Yeah, but please take action as well."

As I've been watching these youth, I've felt the stoniness of my heart, the hopelessness, the cynicism crumbling away, and a new breath moving within me. "Maybe we can change things, maybe this is the moment? Maybe we can turn towards one another, as a people."

Instilling hope is part of what this verse is supposed to do. Prophets are truth tellers and hope tellers. They don't hide from telling us the truth, but they point to God's movement among us, so that we remain hopeful, so that we can still imagine something new for our lives together.

This promise of a new heart, of God pulling us back to our home and center, is similar to the theme of resurrection. Our message in times of heartbreak and anguish, our message in times of anxiety and uncertainty, our message in times when the heaviness and weight of the world is like a stone in the center of our being, is that God is with us, and love will always be working on us and in us to break open something new, and in the process turn us toward one another in new ways.

This is the promise. This is the hope. There are times when we see it in what is going on around us, and we give thanks. There are times when we see it and feel it in our own lives and we give thanks too. May it be so. Amen.