

The Prophets 3: God's Economy

Ezekiel 27

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We are in our third week with the Biblical prophets.

Duke Divinity School scholar Ellen Davis' is our guide. Davis says that "in word and deed, the prophets interpreted the faith for their time, and equally, they interpreted the times for the faithful." We are asking the prophets to help us interpret our times.

In week 1, the prophets spoke to our migration crisis as Moses teaches from Sinai, "You shall not subject the sojourner to pressure; you yourselves know the sojourner's very life, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt."

Last week, the prophet Joel spoke to our ecological and climate crises. Prophets like Joel remind us that God is in relationship with the rest of creation, just like God is in relationship with human beings.

Today's focus is the economy. The prophets aren't economists, they are poets. But they can see clearly the overarching structures that lead to people's suffering, and for them it has everything to do with faithfulness to God.

The 27th chapter of Ezekiel that Marie read is an oracle against the city of Tyre. Tyre is on the Mediterranean coast, north and west of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus mentions the city of Tyre in Luke 10:13-14 as he is pronouncing woe on Chorazin and Bethsaida. Jesus says to them, **14** But at the judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. Jesus is saying, "Chorazin and Bethsaida, you are so sinful, you are even worse than Tyre and Sidon. We see in Homer's *Odyssey* that the city of Tyre and the "Phoenicians had a reputation of being greedy, ruthless traders in goods and in human slaves." The Biblical prophets Isaiah, Amos, Joel, Zechariah, and Ezekiel, all have oracles against the city of Tyre. Zechariah says, Tyre "piled up silver like dust and gold like the mud in the streets."

According to scholar Ellen Davis, "Tyre was the essential agent in the emergence of a new kind of economic system in the ancient world, a system based on the circulation of precious metals (silver and gold), and it was the principal producer (and trader) of luxury merchandise throughout the region." Tyre is associated with luxury, silver and gold, extreme wealth. It's like Bel Aire, Miami Beach, Manhattan and Wall Street.

Of all the prophets, Ezekiel is the master of metaphor. As he starts this oracle against Tyre, he envisions Tyre as a ship loaded down with luxury cargo from three continents. The ship is made from all that Tyre represents: fir, cedar, oak, and pine, all from far away; the deck, pine from Cyprus, is inlaid with ivory, (just the right touch) the sail is not just a sail, it is embroidered linen from Egypt with beautiful stitching and detail, because every sail ripping in the wind needs fine embroidered stitching. The awning used to keep everyone cool is not just linen canvas, it's blue and purple.

This color here is important. According to Davis, “blue and purple colors were rare, because the dyes required to produce them, made from the glandular secretions of murex mollusks of several species, were fabulously expensive.” That is the mollusk pictured on your bulletin cover. “Eight thousand mollusks had to be harvested to produce one gram of violet or red-purple dye.”

She continues, “The Phoenicians, and especially the artisans of Tyre, had brought to perfection the art of extracting and blending the dyes. That is why the Greeks named this people Phoenicians, from the word ‘phoinix,’ meaning “purple” or “crimson” - shades that to this day remain the hallmark of luxury. In order to maintain their distinctive source of wealth over the centuries, the “Purple-people” committed themselves to an extractive economy, which could be supported by vast resources, both natural and human. Beginning in the Iron Age, and continuing through the Roman period, the search for new murex beds was one strong impetus for Phoenician colonization of coastal regions as distant as Spain and the Atlantic coast of North Africa. Great heaps of murex shells, still visible into modern times, marked the location of the colonies, as well as Tyre itself.”

Not only did you need a lot of these mollusks to make purple dye, you needed many people. Deep sea diving was needed to harvest them. People died in this work. All of this economic energy and abuse of people is being used for an awning, and Ezekiel points out how ridiculous this is.

Now that Ezekiel has described the ship which is the city of Tyre, next Ezekiel describes the cargo of the ship, all that Tyre trades. On the ship are silver and gold, jewels, specialty grains and more colored cloth, and slaves being traded with Javan, Tubal, and Mescheh seemingly for bronze and copper. The prophet Joel adds a detail about the Phoenician slave trade that Ezekiel may have assumed people knew, that included in their slaves were captives from Jerusalem and Judah.

In the third act of this chapter, the east wind breaks up the boat, its deck with inlaid ivory, its blue and purple awnings, its embroidered sail, and all of its luxury wares sink to the bottom of the sea. The east wind is the same wind that parted the waters of the Red Sea for the Exodus and destroyed the armies of Egypt that were pursuing the Israelites.

God is sinking of this ship for the sake of justice and liberation. The whole world needs to be freed from this system that simply serves the wealthy at the cost of human lives, and doesn't meet the needs of ordinary people.

Tyre "enriched the kings of the earth," Ezekiel says, And now these "Kings are horribly afraid" and "their faces are convulsed." Maybe those kings are worried that God is going to sink their ship next.

There's a link between these themes of the prophets, and the gospels and Jesus.

Here is Mary's song, the Magnificat from Luke chapter 1, a song that tells us who Jesus is going to be:

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

Ezekiel's God is sinking the king's ships, and sweet Mary's God, who is coming
in a new way, is bringing down the kings from their thrones.

We hear something similar in Luke 4 when Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah and
says

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Ezekiel's God is sinking all that keeps people enslaved with the same East wind that freed the slaves from Egypt, and Jesus is starting a ministry that proclaims release for these same captives.

Ezekiel sinks the economy of Empire in the sea, an economy that concentrates wealth in the hands of a few and leaves many without what they need. God and Moses left the Empire of Egypt in ruins in the Red Sea. When Jesus appears with Moses at the transfiguration in Luke, the gospel tells us they are discussing Jesus' Exodus. Jesus ministry of the Kingdom of God is the opposite of the Empire of Egypt, the opposite of the Empire that Tyre represents, the opposite of the Empire of Rome.

Over and over the prophets and Jesus are articulating the good news of a different kind of economy, one that is rooted in God's abundance, generosity, and care and concern for all people.

The good news of God's economy is made visible in stories like the loaves and fishes. The multitudes can be fed with just a little when the bread is broken and shared. Then we are working with God's blessing, not against it, when we are breaking and sharing together.

Similarly, the church practices this alternative way of being, at the communion table. At the table, everyone has a place, everyone has worth, everyone is a child of

God. When bread is broken and shared there's enough for all. This what we practice and take into our bodies. This practice shapes how we live and it shapes what we see.

Not long ago, I was listening to the story of a single mom who lives and works in Northfield, but works four jobs to pay rent and provide for her children. At the same time I came across a Forbes Magazine article announcing that there are 2,153 billionaires in the world. Amazon Founder, Jeff Bezos and his fortune of 131 billion dollars, tops the list.

Here are a couple of stories about what two of these billionaires have done with their money. Think of the ship of Tyre.

The Sultan of Brunei owns a legendary fleet containing between 5,000 and 7,000 of the world's rarest, finest, best performing and most expensive cars, which Top Speed values at a combined \$5 billion — at least. Among the finest gems are 21 Lamborghinis, 452 Ferraris and 604 Rolls Royces, including the “Star of India,” a \$14 million Rolls convertible that has the distinction of being [the world's most expensive car](#).

Mukesh Ambani inherited and controls an oil empire that has earned him an estimated net worth of about \$43 billion. The Indian magnate used \$1 billion of that fortune to build the most expensive home in his native country — and the entire world. According to Forbes, Ambani's residence is a 27-story, 400,000-square-foot skyscraper that boasts three helicopter pads and six underground parking levels. Named after the mythical island of

Antilla, its amenities reportedly include a ballroom, a 50-seat theater and nine elevators in the lobby alone.

The prophets, and Jesus, the Bible, and the church, hold these kinds of stories next to the story of the woman working four jobs to feed her children and say, “this doesn’t make any sense.” The prophets go on to say that the love of God, for the sake of the healing of the world, is always working to bring a new economy into being, one where the woman working four jobs to feed her family has enough, and the rich are brought low. Ezekiel would say that what is corrupt and keeping people from having enough will be sunk at the bottom of the sea.

I can see this sort of good news getting Jesus crucified. But the church proclaims that this good news is alive and embodied by a community that is partnering with God in the redeeming and healing of the world. May the prophets help us interpret our times. Amen.