

Text: Ezekiel 36: 24-28
Title: "A Heart Condition"
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The book of Ezekiel can be really weird. And brutal. Even among his other crazy fellow prophets, Ezekiel could be labeled The Extreme One. Beating out the likes of Jeremiah and Isaiah and Daniel for the title.

Ezekiel ate scrolls handed to him by angels.
Saw flying creatures half-human half-animal.
For 390 days he laid on his side bound with rope. Just to make a point.
God almost had him bake bread using human feces for fuel, but that was a line for Old Zeke and they negotiated and God let him use cow manure instead.

Ezekiel was extreme - even for a prophet. And he kinda had to be.

The circumstances he faced were not easy ones. The best and the brightest in Israel had been marched out of the Promised Land and to Babylon as punishment for an uprising against the Babylonian king, who just happened to be dominate world power at that time.

So, most of God's people were in exile at this point. And in the middle of Ezekiel's time as prophet, the city of Jerusalem was invaded and destroyed. The Temple sacked and burned. The people slaughtered or fleeing. Ezekiel was a prophet during the darkest of times. But that wasn't the worst part.

The worst part was the message Ezekiel was to deliver to his people:

"This has all come to pass because you have hardened your hearts, loved idols, turned away from God, and broke every commandment."

Basically Ezekiel had to go around telling people: "This is your fault. You brought this on yourself." Didn't exactly make him the most popular guy.

Against this brutal backdrop of exile and kings and betrayal and destruction, Ezekiel is ultimately a book about the heart.

Throughout Ezekiel, you'll find again and again mention made about the heart condition of those involved.

Those who persecute and attack God's people are described repeatedly as having "greed and malice in their hearts."

The people of Israel are summed up as having "idols in their hearts".

And it's this heart condition that is the focus of Ezekiel's prophecies. And our passage this morning.

To set the scene, you have to go back to chapter 8. Ezekiel gets caught up in a vision - carried away from his place among the exiles to the temple back in Jerusalem. And God shows him exactly how his people have idols in their hearts.

At the main gate of the inner court of the temple, they placed a large idol of a foreign god. Violating the covenant vows where they promised to have no other gods.

And then God takes him inside the court where on the walls God's people had painted all kinds of foreign gods and idols and vile creatures. Idolatrous graffiti in the holy place of God's presence.

And before the images, the elders of the people were prostrate, burning incense and worshipping. And God said to Ezekiel: "Son of man, do you see what the elders of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say to themselves, 'The Lord does not see us.'"

And then a series of quick images:

A woman grieving the death of Tammuz, a Babylonian god who dies at the end of the summer solstice.

A group of men with their backs to the Temple and their faces raised to the rising sun, bowing to the sun as a god.

The people of God betrayed their God.

And they thought they were safe because "The Lord does not see us."

The beating heart of their covenant with God was that simple promise made on Mount Sinai:
"I will be your God and you will be my people."

And they turned their backs to that promise and raised their hands to other gods and placed their sacrifices on altars to idols of stone. And, it's then no surprise, they became what they worshiped:

Idols of stone. With hearts of stone.

Over and over again through the book of Ezekiel, God cries to his people: "Why do you choose death? Repent! Live!" In chapter 18, God begs them "to repent...get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die?"

The heart condition of God's people was terminal.

A death sentence.

A heart of stone, a heart given to idols, is a lifeless heart.

Unable to beat with love or joy or life.

Our idols may not be made of stone, or like the god Tammuz have the head of a bull, but that doesn't mean we don't have them.

Frederick Buechner defines idolatry as:

the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth. Under certain circumstances money, patriotism, sexual freedom, moral principles, family loyalty, physical health, social or intellectual preeminence, and so on are fine things to have around, but to make them the standard by which all other values are measured, to make them your masters, to look to them to justify your life and save your soul is sheerest folly.

While it's easy to mock the Israelites for bowing down to bull-headed statues of stone, it's less easy to laugh when we start talking about the idols that hit closer to home.

In a past episode of the CBC One program, *Ideas*, the topic was "Idolatry for Beginners." This was back when Peter Kennedy was still the host and the episode asked the question whether or not the religious language of idolatry held any meaning for our modern secular society.

Through the course of the program, one of the guests, Lorna Dueck, summed up the act of idolatry:

When we are...reaching for an idol...we intuitively realize that 'I am a person looking for a salvation system.' That I love the idea that there is something out there - some system, some technique, some person - that can actually help me with my need for human resiliency. I've got a source, I've got a system, that will help me bounce back through what I want to get through.

Reaching for a salvation system. Looking for someone or something to save us. To justify our life and save our soul, as Buechner writes.

What's the system, the technique, the person, that you reach out for - thinking it will save you?

What idols are in your heart?

If God were to take Ezekiel on a tour of your heart like he did with the temple, what would he point out to the prophet?

Have you raised a statue to the power that a large bank account gives you?

Have you made sacrifices on the altar of having a perfect family?

Have you burned incense in front of an image of the hoped for perfect spouse who will satisfy all of your loneliness and desire?

Do you find yourself looking to your job, your career, your position to justify your life? So much so that you've sacrificed your relationship with your children on the altar of your successful business?

Have you made an idol of being right all the time?

Or made an idol of other people's approval? So that you don't feel right in your own skin until you hear those little words even from a stranger: "Good job"?

What else is taking up space as an idol in your heart?

Political ideology? Religious certainty? The Canadiens? (Too soon?)

Lorna Dueck, the guest on *Ideas*, talked about how you know if something you love has become an idol.

She said that she asks herself continually about her loves:

Is it producing fruitfulness?

Does this love of my job, or my Conservative party, or my favourite sports team, does joy come from it? Does life? Am I becoming a more loving person and a more welcoming person because of this love? Which is to ask the question: Am I becoming more Christ-like?

And whenever the answer is 'no', it's likely that an idol is taking up residence in your heart.

We turn to our idols for salvation - for security, meaning, purpose, worth - and they simply take our life and our love and giving us nothing in return. Just hardened hearts of stone.

And that's when we hear God's plea to us as to the Israelites:

"Repent! Live! Change your heart!
Renew your spirit. Don't choose death! Leave your idols."

But we can't help ourselves. Our heart condition just gets worse. Our hearts get harder. Our idols stronger.

Thankfully we are loved by a jealous God.

Here in Ezekiel 36, the people of God, unable to change their hearts or leave their idols, hear the saving word of the Lord:

I will take you out of the nations;
I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back home.
I will sprinkle you with water;
I will wash you clean from all your dirt and all your idols.
I will remove from you your hardened heart of stone;
I will give you a new beating heart of flesh and blood.
I will breathe my Spirit into you, giving you life and hope and strength.
I will be your God and you will be my people.
Because that's who I am and that's who you truly are. Mine.

**Knowing that his people could not save themselves.
Knowing that their idols could not save them either.
God steps in to save.**

To wash his people clean.
To scrub away the dirt.
To cleanse them of their idols.
To remove the lifeless stone heart and replace it with a beating heart made for relationship. To breathe his Spirit into them.
And to claim them again as his own.

These are the same words we hear in our baptism.
The same undeserved words of grace.
The same words of promise and belonging and renewal that are ours as we are washed clean by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now that doesn't mean this process of removing idols from our hearts will be easy. At all.

God doesn't just snap his fingers and make life easy for us. Nah-uh. Instead, like a good parent, a good coach, God takes us by the hand and helps us with the task at hand. Patiently teaching and training us as we clear our heart of idols, as we learn and as we fail and as we continue on.

Removing idols from our life is painful work. Sanctifying work. It requires that we be brutally honest with ourselves and with God - about our own shortcomings, weaknesses, fears, and desires. And that is also fearful work. But good Spirit-filled work.

Work that changes us from the inside out.

Removing from us our heart of stone and giving us a heart flesh.

Thanks be to God.