

Kailua Christian Church
Sunday, September 10, 2023
“Beauty Out of Ugliness”
Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

Ezekiel 33:7-11

7 So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. 8 If I say to the wicked, “O wicked ones, you shall surely die,” and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. 9 But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

10 Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel: Thus you have said: “Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?” 11 Say to them: As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Matthew 7:7-11

7 “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 9 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for bread, would give a stone? 10 Or if the child asked for a fish, would give a snake? 11 If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Sermon: Beauty Out of Ugliness

I want to tell you the story about how I fell in love with my husband, Hamza. I was living in Jordan, which is a small country between Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and Egypt. This was just after I’d graduated seminary and was part of a mission to build schools for refugee children. I had recently met Hamza through a mutual friend, and I was grateful to have him as a local guide in a foreign country.

One night, my girlfriend and I went to a party at the US embassy and she ended up having too much wine. We took a taxi back to my apartment, and on the way, she leaned over and began vomiting all over the back seat. The driver pulled over, cursing at us, and I apologized profusely to him while I held her hair out the passenger window. I went to pay him and found that my wallet was missing, to which I apologized more to this poor driver but he seemed like he mostly just wanted us to get out of his car at that point.

I called Hamza and asked if he could come pick us up, since the taxi driver had dumped us in the middle of nowhere (reasonably so, in his defense). Hamza, being the saint that he is, arrived in minutes and even volunteered to call the Jordanian bank to have my debit card canceled since I couldn’t find my wallet.

The annoyed nighttime security guard at the other end of the bank's telephone told him the call center offices were shut for the night and I'd have to call back to cancel the card in the morning. We did call back in the morning, but unfortunately by then, the entire contents of my bank account had been cleared out. In early 2010's, Jordan apparently didn't have a 24/7 mechanism for securing bank cards, nor did they have limits on the amount of cash that could be withdrawn from an ATM in a single transaction. I had made a terrible mistake of leaving my pincode to the new card in my wallet, and the thief who had taken it withdrew all \$3,000 I had to my name.

Hamza made avenging my misfortune his full time job for the next two weeks. He handed the keys to the print shop he owned to his friend and went all over Amman trying to identify the villain who had wiped my bank account. He managed to get the security footage of the ATM where the funds were withdrawn, and we discovered that the culprit was the taxi driver himself, who in the grainy imaging looked visibly pleased with his lucrative discovery. Hamza drove around trying to find the wicked taxi driver. He went to police stations to demand they conduct investigations; he went to the bank to demand they reimburse me with some consumer liability insurance for failing to respond to my request to have the card deactivated on time; he went to taxi stands with the security images to ask if anyone had seen the thief.

All of his efforts failed. He never found the taxi driver. The police complied with his requests, but ultimately didn't come up with any intel. The bank refused to acknowledge or correct their mistakes. The wicked won. I was out my entire life savings and Hamza was out two weeks of work and 3 tanks of gas. At the time, it seemed like a total waste of time.

But here's the thing – God makes beauty out of even the ugliest of things. No one in my life had ever so intensely stood up for me before. I'd always been a fiercely independent person with an attitude that I didn't need anyone's help for anything. I'd traveled several countries by myself at that point, put myself through college and seminary, and turned my life around after some pretty harrowing teenage years. And then came Hamza, who showed me in those two weeks that I didn't need to do everything by myself anymore.

If I found that taxi driver again, I'd still be annoyed with him – but I'd also thank him for introducing me to the abundantly generous character of my now husband. I may have lost \$3,000, but I gained a partner in building a life and that's worth more than any money in the world.

This is the story that came to mind for me when Ezekiel writes, "But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life." Hamza made a considerable attempt to turn the wicked from their ways in this situation, and wound up finding a larger plan for his life as a result of his efforts. God makes beauty out of even the ugliest of things.

This is one thing that I've found uniformly true about my interactions with God. Bad things happen, people do wicked things, and a lot of life is chaos and pain that's largely out of our control. Yet, 100% of the time, when we turn to God to ask for the path forward into renewal, God provides the way. The way forward may not look the way we imagined it, but it's always better than what we could have planned for ourselves.

Now, my example feels small in comparison to other tragedies that can happen in life. Losing a couple thousand bucks is nothing compared to things like the devastation of war, child loss, terminal diagnosis, or the myriad of other tragedies we experience as humans. But the thing is, Ezekiel was writing about returning to God and finding redemption during the most devastating period of war and suffering that could arguably be found in biblical history.

Ezekiel, as well as Isaiah, both wrote their books through a time period known as the Babylonian Exile in the 6th century BC. Solomon's Temple, which you'll have a chance to take a virtual tour of with me in a couple weeks, had been the pinnacle of religious life and faith for over 500 years during the time of Ezekiel's writing. The Babylonian Empire destroyed it and sent Ezekiel's community into exile in the year 586 BC. Everything they had ever known was gone and they were decimated in a strange land under a new ruler. Ezekiel writes in previous chapters about watching all his friends and family murdered in front of him. Unlike my slightly discouraging thievery episode, Ezekiel had lost everything. Yet, while Ezekiel was grappling with the terrible grief of these events, he still managed to find faith that God would deliver redemption if the people only turned to Him for guidance.

About 30 years after the Babylonians destroyed Solomon's temple, Cyrus the Great came and conquered the Babylonians and returned stewardship of the land to Ezekiel's community. Ezekiel got the redemption story that he knew God would deliver as he watched the Temple be rebuilt and the community restored. The Book of Isaiah covers this same historical arch of grief and destruction to restoration and renewal, because it was a really important time period of biblical history. God makes beauty out of even the ugliest things, from petty thievery to total destruction of a society.

Jesus lived through a similar repeating of history to Ezekiel. He lived during a time of civil unrest as it became increasingly clearer that the Roman Empire intended to capture Jerusalem and destroy the community again. Shortly after Jesus died, the Temple was once again destroyed and never rebuilt. Jesus, like Ezekiel, nevertheless had hope for redemption for the faithful and preached promises of renewal for all that believed in Him. The resulting community of worldwide Christians that was borne from that promise is the greatest social movement that the world has ever known.

From petty thievery that is transformed into lifelong love, to destruction of a sacred Temple that is transformed into a worldwide community of disciples, God has the ability to transform any ugly thing into a beautiful thing. We need not fear through times of turbulence because He has delivered on this promise again and again. Knock, and the door will be opened to you.

We Christians have faith in this sacred promise that all things are possible through God. However, my short retelling of these stories from meeting Hamza, to Ezekiel's community losing the Temple, to Jesus' community losing the Temple again, are exactly that – short, easy wrapped packages of hope. Anyone who's read my resume knows that most of my career has been spent in the ugliest, darkest places, in which hope is just a flicker in the dark if existent at all. I could tell you with absolute certainty that the road through tragedy, loss, and destruction doesn't look or sound like a hopeful story of triumph at all when you're in the thick of it. All of us who have been through the darkness know that the road from grief to renewal is not straight, clean, or simple.

The last two weeks, I talked about how when we try to simplify that road to transformation into something that is neat and tidy, we often fail in our goal. I highlight the redemption in Ezekiel's

story, but really most of the book is a chaotic nightmare of sadness and destruction. I highlight the promise of Jesus' words, but we must remember he also died a horrible death to achieve that promise for us. Next week, I'll be talking more about how we can be supportive of ourselves and others that walk the incredibly difficult road from suffering to redemption.

God can open doors and make beauty out of any ugliness. But to get to that beauty, we have to be willing to sit with the weird, twisted imagery of Ezekiel's grief. We have to be willing to witness the tragic suffering and death of Christ before we can witness His resurrection. We have to hold 24-year-old Irene's hand as she sits on the couch mourning her total financial loss in a foreign country. And we will talk about how to do that next week. But for now, let us rejoice that all things are possible through He that opens the doors for us – because at the end of the story, those who turn to God for guidance and hope will always find greater possibilities than they could have imagined, and that is indeed an important thing to rejoice.

Amen.