

The God Who Restores

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[0 : 0 0] Bow our heads and pray. Heavenly Father, now as we turn to your word, we pray that you would speak to us in our need and anxiety and our arrogance and our pride.

Give us the humility that we need to hear what you have to say. Help us to live as those who believe of the life of the world to come and to live that life now.

Increase in us the fruit of your spirit and direct our hope toward the things that are permanent. In Christ's name, amen.

Well, if you would turn back to Ezekiel 36 on page 723, I don't know about you, but I have found the book of Ezekiel challenging.

It's probably challenging to listen to. It's certainly been different and unusual, wonderful. But next we're going to have something simpler.

[1 : 0 3] When we start up next year, I think we'll go to a gospel because the preachers are pretty tired. And today's passage is no exception. We get to overhear a conversation from God to the mountains of Israel.

The whole thing is a prophecy by God through Ezekiel, speaking directly to the mountains. Verse 1, You, son of man, prophesy to the mountains of Israel and say, O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Lord.

And there are two sections, two paragraphs. In the first one, God explains to the mountains why exile happened. It shows why things blew apart. And it's full of God's kindness towards his mountains, compassion to his mountains.

And the second section, again, is to the mountains, starting at verse 8. It's how God is going to unite what is divided by creating a new home. This is very exciting for the mountains. Now, mountains in the Old Testament and land in the Old Testament go together.

And they're not just real estate. They're not turf. They're not just dirt. They have symbolic and spiritual significance, as you know. There's a meaning and quality to them that's probably best captured in our current or in the idea of home and our longing for home.

[2 : 2 9] Very simple concept. Home, isn't it? We heard a bit about it this morning. You go home to where you're safe, a dark closet. I've never found that particularly helpful. But in the earlier service, we had kids going under the covers of mum's bed.

I thought that was a bit closer. But home is a place of rest. It's a place of safety and security. It's the story of our lives. It's who we are. It's where we come from.

It's where you belong. It's where you're loved. It's where you get your identity from. Walter Brueggemann, who is a biblical scholar, says, it's a space that has historic meaning, where some things have happened that are now remembered and that provide continuity and identity across generations.

So recently I was home for my dad's funeral. And whenever we gathered as a family, we told stories, which some of them span generations. He goes on.

He says, It's a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom. Very helpful.

[3 : 38] And this is very important for us. Because today we have two almost contradictory views of land and home and place, don't we? On the one hand, we've diminished it and reduced it to its basic economic value.

We talk about, you know, we treat property like dirt. Sorry for saying it that way. But we see this primarily as a way to gain wealth. And on the opposite hand, we've glamorized and inflated the view of home.

So there are a rash of magazines out right now. The one that comes under my door is called West Coast Homes. The current edition has articles on how to have a home that will defy your expectations.

Or how to stage your home so that it will be fit for a millionaire. Now, I think it should be fit for a billionaire myself. But, you know, it is Vancouver.

And they advertise properties. They put a picture of a property and they say, Live the lifestyle. That's the capital letters. Or where living is easy. And I look at them and I think, Yeah, you know, if I lived there, it would be easy.

[4 : 50] But it's a lie, of course. Because this contradictory idea we have that it's just money. But on the other hand, if I just got the right property, if I just lived in the right place with the right home, with the right family, with the right wife, all my dreams would be fulfilled.

I'd be self-actualized. Everything would be different. I'd have a true home. But reality is very different, isn't it, in Vancouver? However, housing is increasingly unaffordable to the majority.

We live in a city with homelessness, which is a terrible and dehumanizing reality. And it's so visible that you can win elections by promising to end homelessness.

But there's a deeper poverty, of course. Mother Teresa says, We think sometimes the poverty is only being hungry, naked and homeless. She goes on, The poverty of being unwanted, unloved and uncared for is the greatest poverty.

And I would want to say, with due respect, the Bible would say there's a deeper poverty still. And that's being separated from God. Because our true homelessness has to do with God.

[6 : 10] In the Old Testament, land, mountains and home are all brought together to teach us what true home is all about. Because God sets three things together.

He sets place, land, and people, and himself. The presence of God, the presence of people, and God's land. And if you separate any one of those from the other two, you destroy any hope of true home.

If you separate people from place, or place from people, or God from place, or God from people, you destroy true home. Story of humanity and the story of the Old Testament is how we basically wreck God's home by separating one from the other two.

And how we constantly build substitutes to try and pretend it's true home. And those substitutes always fall through and they all fail us because they cannot bear the weight of our desires that we were created for in the beginning.

Because in the beginning, when God created Adam and Eve, he didn't create them to float around in thin air, did he? He created them and he put them in a place.

[7 : 21] Paradise, garden, Eden, God's presence, people, and God's place. But instead of holding those three things together, Adam and Eve chose place over God.

And they disobeyed God and they turned to creation and the dividend is human shame. But it's a story of how when you sever those connections that make paradise home, it creates exile.

And God exiled them from the garden, which is where we've been ever since. And that goes some way to explaining this deep desire all of us have for a permanent home. This sense of alienation that we have from God and from one another and from creation.

And it's why we keep being disappointed by the fact that nothing can fit this longing for home apart from God himself. The story of Israel moves the same direction.

God takes a man, Abram, who has no land whatsoever and he promises to reunite those three things together. He promises him salvation. And the key to the salvation blessing is land, a place.

[8 : 35] And now here we are at the end of the Old Testament in Ezekiel and Israel has ruined it again. They have gone into the land which God gave them. But in that land, they rejected God and they severed that link and they made the land.

They tried to make the land their possession and now they've lost their home and they are in exile. So God makes two points to the mountains. And the first one in the first paragraph in verses 1 to 7 is that we divide what God unites.

We divide what God unites. Because the basic problem for the mountains of Israel is people. Both Israel and the people who are now walking on them as conquerors.

Because people keep dividing God from place and from themselves. Let me show you what I mean. Let's take Israel which are now in exile. Throughout the passage, God addresses the mountains simply as mountains.

Mountains, mountains, mountains. But in verse 2, it's different. In verse 2, he calls them the ancient heights. And those of you who've been looking through the book of Ezekiel know that's a loaded term because the heights were the high places and the hills in Israel that Israel used for the appalling practices of turning to other gods, heartily giving themselves over with the most appalling appalling practices.

[9 : 59] They took their children and burnt them alive offering them to pagan gods. And they combined all sorts of sexual practices of every kind in worship to the idols.

And there's so much about that that we could say. But the thing I want to say from this passage is that what Israel tried to do was to separate God from his mountains. God from his land.

Because burning children and sexual indulgence were not wrong just in themselves but they were part of the fertility cult that the pagan nations round about them observed.

And they're a wicked attempt to try and wrest the land out of God's hands to bring them into our control. It was like a primitive religious land management scheme.

Because if you did these things, you conducted these rituals, they would make the rain fall and they would make the grass grow and they would make the harvest ripen taking it out of God's hands imagining that we're the ones in control.

[10 : 59] And whenever you find people giving the lives of their children away and using the gift of sexuality against or just for themselves for control, it means they're separating themselves, they're separating God out of the picture somehow.

The poor old mountains of Israel just had to take it. They had to bear the wickedness of God's people. And so the high places and the heights, instead of flowing with milk and honey, flowed with blood and fire and depravity and the triangle was broken.

Because you see, home is not just place, it's not just physical space. It's place and people with God. If you take God out of the picture, it's no longer home.

That's why the exile happened. God drives his people from the land because it's his land. Yes, he'd given it to his people to possess, but it remained his holy land in exactly the same way that everything you and I have, your gifts, your talents, your life, your abilities, your sense of humor, your looks, these things are not ours, truly ours, but they're on loan from God to use for him.

Israel wanted land without God. They wanted God's blessing, they just didn't want God. They wanted freedom and security to do all that they could but without God.

[12 : 27] And whenever we do that, we find ourselves being alienated. And the other group that the mountains had to put up with were the new invaders who took over the land.

They were no better. Three times we hear their inner thoughts because they think they've taken possession of the land. It now belongs, they own it. We've beaten those little Israelites, those puny Israelites and they show their content for God by mocking God's people.

See verse five? Therefore thus says the Lord God, Surely I have spoken in my hot jealousy against the rest of the nations and against all Edom who gave my land to themselves as a possession with wholehearted joy and utter contempt that they might make its pasture land a prey.

They thought they had separated the land from God and from the people. The great irony is that what they're saying to themselves is exactly the sin that God evicted Israel over, that they own the land.

It's a very dangerous irony because whoever despises God's people finds they end up despising God himself. when God says that he has hot jealousy, it's not the vindictive, non-sharing, selfish envy that we have.

[13 : 49] It is the passion of God for whom he loves and for our well-being. So as this first section ends, God announces that he is going to rejoin what's been divided.

You see verse six? It's not so clear. He says, therefore prophesy concerning the land of Israel, say to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys, thus says the Lord God.

And this is the first command to the mountains. He says, behold, and in the original it's literally behold me. It's not quite translated. God's saying, mountains, this is what's happened, but I am here.

I am present. The one thing Israel forgot, the one thing the enemies cannot see is the presence of God. And that opens the door to the second paragraph because if we constantly divide what God unites, we now move into the second paragraph as God unites what we divide, verses eight to 15.

Are you with me so far? Enthusiastically. Good. All right. So how does God unite what we divide? Verse eight.

[15 : 00] But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people Israel, for they will soon come home.

See what God's doing? The land has been missing people. It's usually the other way around in the Old Testament. It's usually that God promises land as a gift to people, but now he's saying to the land, now I'm going to send you people as though the mountains are lonely and unfulfilled without the people.

It's wonderful, isn't it? And they will come home because home includes place. It's not just humans and God together. Because what the land wants is people.

That's what it was created for. God is appealing to the maternal instincts of the mountains. They long to have people walking on them again to be united with God and his people.

Just, I mean, just cast your eyes down verses 10 and 11. I'll multiply people on you. Whole house of Israel, all of it, the cities will be inhabited, the waste places rebuilt. I'll multiply on you man and beast.

[16 : 11] They will multiply and be fruitful. I'll cause you to be inhabitants in the former times. I will do more good to you than ever before. Then you'll know that I am the Lord.

I'll let people walk on you. Even my people Israel, they shall possess you and you shall be their inheritance. And you'll no longer bereave them of children, which of course is a reference to child sacrifice.

It's very different than what we hear from the environmental movement today, don't we? I mean, much of the environmental literature today says that humanity is the disease and that our ecosystem would be much better off if humanity was annihilated.

Well, in one sense, I think God would agree because something very radical has to happen to humanity before we can be entrusted with paradise again.

And we're not going to look at this today, but I know you're all familiar with it because the second half of the passage is how God makes new people for the new land. And I know it was preached on just a few weeks ago.

[17 : 14] Dan, did you preach this passage? Not you, okay. Just to cast your eye down to verse 26. verse 26. I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I'll put within you.

I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh and I'll put my spirit within you, cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

And what does that mean for the land? Verse 35. People will say this land that was desolate has become like the Garden of Eden. So land is not just meant to be left alone.

God's intention is not just clean streams and fresh grass. God made the earth for his own glory. He made it for humankind, individuals and families who have the Holy Spirit in them, who walk in God's statutes.

The land longs for these spirit-filled people to be a true home again. The problem for us is that we're half saved, aren't we? We are redeemed and yet we await the redemption of our bodies.

[18 : 23] And that's why the whole creation groans like a woman in labour, longing for the new creation. The mountains long to be walked on, not left alone, but peopled by fully redeemed children.

And that only happens when the children of God, when we receive our resurrection bodies. But how is God going to do this? How is he going to heal the land and heal the people together? Verse 9, God says, for behold, I am for you and I will turn to you.

And that word is the same basis as the word face. God says, I'm going to turn my face towards you. He's reassuring the mountains of his favour and goodness that he'll bring things together with his presence.

And what is the one problem for us reading this passage? I think the most obvious problem is that these promises are completely over the top. They haven't happened.

We don't live in Eden. We're still waiting for the new heavens and the new earth. The wolf and the lamb don't lie down together. Children still die. And I think what this passage is teaching us is that God will do this but it is still in our future and it's not going to arise out of our clever technology or education or design.

[19 : 46] It's going to come from God. But it's more than we can expect because God says, I will do more good for you than ever before and that means we don't just go back to the Garden of Eden.

It's something completely new. We've used the word restoration to describe salvation through Ezekiel but it's not just restoration to the former thing. It's going to be better. It's not just salvation is not just the reversal of bad effects so that we go back to neutral.

It's a radical renewal to a place that's never been before. So what does that mean for us today? What does it mean for those of us who now live, try to live as Christians after Christ, before the coming again of Christ?

What does it mean tomorrow? I think it means this. that because these promises are so over the top that the promises God gave to these mountains apply directly to us.

They have not been fulfilled and that's a wonderful thing in a way because it means Vancouver is not the promised land. I know lots of people think it is.

[20 : 56] We're in the same position as these exiles. We're in the same position that Abraham was. Abraham lived his life based on a promise of the land. He lived for an invisible future.

He lived in this world with his eyes on the next. And even though God promised to give Abraham the land, he never owned it. He was buried in it but he never possessed it and his whole life was leaning forward towards God's promise eagerly anticipating what God was going to do.

And when we come to the New Testament we discover that Abraham was looking forward not to Canaan but to the heavenly land to the heavenly Jerusalem. So just turn right to Hebrews 11 for a moment please.

So in verse 8 Hebrews 11 I make page 1007 we pick up Abraham's story and in verse 9 we read By faith Abraham went to live in the land of promise as in a foreign land living in tents with Isaac and Jacob heirs with him of the same promise.

Why? For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God. Verse 13 These all Abraham and the Old Testament saints died in faith not having received the things promised but having seen them and greeted them from afar and acknowledging that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

[22 : 33] Verse 16 As it is they desire a better country that is a heavenly one therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God for he has prepared for them a city.

This is our story. It's exactly the same in the wilderness when God rescued his people out of Egypt. Why did he spend so long in the wilderness?

Because you see in the wilderness he took away all the props of normal life. They couldn't till the soil they couldn't reap the vine they couldn't dig their wells.

God was teaching them to long for their true home. He fed them every morning with fresh manna from heaven he gave them water from the rock he transformed the wilderness into a banqueting table to teach his people to rely on him to live by faith and not by sight to live for the invisible future in this world with their eyes on the next.

And even though they entered the land they quickly turned away from God and acted as though they were entitled dividing the land from God and eventually God divided the land from them. And here in exile the people in exile what's God doing?

[23 : 47] He's taking them back into a wilderness experience and that's what God always does when we lose sight of this so that his people will learn to live not by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

God will have us live by faith and not by sight in the invisible and future promise. He has us live in this world with our eyes on the world to come and these people have no hope.

There's no land there's no Jerusalem they've lost it all which I think makes it absolutely astounding that he should promise to give them a new home the same people who defiled and defaced his land in the first place they've done nothing to deserve it.

What's God teaching us from this passage? It's to live by faith in the promise to live for the invisible future. We are now in the second week of Advent we learn this time of the year that when Jesus came there was no place there was no home for him here either amongst his people or physically.

The Gospel of John when it opens says that the word of God became flesh and dwelled among us and that word dwell is the word for pitching a tent. It was a temporary dwelling. He did not come to set up home here he came to set us up in home there and to bring us into that place.

[25 : 12] And I think this means two things for us this morning there are lots of implications but here are just two. One's a caution and the other is an encouragement. Caution is this that this world cannot sustain our hopes of the true home.

There is no house there is no family there is nothing that can give us what God alone can give us. and so we need to be careful where we put our love and our longing I think.

We live in anticipation. We live between being uprooted out of the garden and being replanted in the heavenly city. We've been expelled from Eden but we long for our true home which has become a certain promise in Jesus Christ that eternal home where the people of God live in the presence of God and in the place of God.

And until you realise that is your true home you'll constantly give your life to find your true home in other things. House, family, career, whatever. It's not the way.

We have here no lasting city. We seek the city that is to come. But I think there's deep encouragement as well because we have better promises than these ones that God gave to the mountains.

[26 : 30] We've seen the face of God in Jesus Christ and Jesus said he promised to go ahead and to prepare a place for us and that he is going to come back for us and take us to be with him in the new heavens and the new earth.

And I think that opens the door so that we can place our hopes and our heart on something really solid. Because it means our inheritance, your inheritance and my inheritance in Jesus Christ for the true home is kept in heaven by God undefiled, imperishable, eternal.

And to live by faith now and to live seeking the city is to come means to hold everything that we have with an open hand. And that doesn't mean skimming across the top of life.

That means we are truly able to enter into the depths of life because we're not going to be disappointed. We're not putting all our eggs into this basket. We're not looking to have finances or our family or our fund to make home.

We're not living with constant disappointment. But even now I think living in this world with our eyes on the next every now and again as we try and hold place and people and God together we get glimpses don't we of our future home.

[27 : 53] And I think hospitality and generosity and hope are all mixed together in the Christian community. Peter says according to his promise we're waiting for a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Therefore beloved brothers and sisters since you are waiting for these be diligent to be found by him without spot and blemish and at peace.

Let's kneel and pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen.