

Midweek Lenten Series: Making Change

Week of Lent 4: Change of Heart

March 25, 2020

Greeting

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. This is an opportunity to stop and pause at this Holy time to reflect on our relationship with God and others.

Call to Worship

Beloved set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm.
For love is strong as death;
passion fierce as the grave.

**O God, search me and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.** Song of Sol. 8:6, Ps. 139:23-24 NRSV

Opening Prayer

O God of our longing, strengthen us and dwell in our hearts, that we would be rooted and grounded in your love. Help us to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of your mercy shown to us on the cross. Fill our hearts with your grace, that we lead lives that radiate your love to all. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Hymn

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart

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Scripture Reading Ezekiel 36:22-28 NIV

²² “Therefore say to the Israelites, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. ²³ I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.

²⁴ “For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. ²⁸ Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God.

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Reflection

Sometimes it can be a little scary to use certain scriptures. This is one of those scriptures that some Christians might use to say that God is doing a certain kind of cleansing in the world. That would be a huge misuse of scripture. As one minister shared in an email to other ministers in the PCC, "This pandemic is not God's will, and while we believe that our Lord is ruler over our world, medicine and common sense also have a role to play." So I start with that statement in order to be able to set that aside and look at how this scripture is about changing our hearts, receiving a new spirit, and God being glorified.

This scripture was a game changer for me when I was in my early thirties. I had three children, a husband who worked away from home a lot, and I was struggling with depression that had started after the birth of my third child. I lived with depression for about eight years. This scripture was part of my healing, along with much prayer, appropriate medicine, and counseling. It took all of those things for me to heal, for me to understand I had a new spirit within me, but this scripture was my grounding point.

For me water is my happy spot and I believe that is why when I found this scripture it became my fight song. I carried it around in my pocket, I said it over and over again. I prayed it. I would say to God, "You promised that you would change my heart and put a new spirit in me," and I believed God would. God did change my heart, my entire being really. Yet over time, with change and healing of many things in my life this scripture faded as others verses spoke to me in new and important ways. But whenever it pops up again, I am brought back to that time in my life when I clung to these words and am once again reminded of the importance of water to my soul.

I am a person who likes to shower in the morning because it kick-starts my body, mind, and spirit. In January I started going to the pool because I wanted to strengthen my knees, but I kept going because of the healing that I also found happening in my mind and spirit. Just being in the water cleared my mind. Sadly, like many things for all of us, swimming is on hold for a while, but I can find other ways to have water heal me. Listening to the sound of rippling streams or the powerful sound of a waterfall even just as meditation sounds is calming. I enjoy using water in worship because it reminds me of the cleansing, healing aspects of water. Of course, there is the reminder of the water of baptism and all the symbolism around that.

The cleansing that is being written about in the verses from Ezekiel are about changed hearts and God's spirit within the people. You see, the Hebrew people of this time were living in exile. Their beloved city of Jerusalem was in ruins. Things were very bleak. This scripture was about hope. Hope for change, but the first thing that needed to change was the hearts of the people. People had turned from worshiping and listening to God. They were making choices that did not honour God. And God let them make those choices, but there were consequences. For the Israelites to be taken from their land was the harshest consequence they could possibly face because in the Old Testament it was made clear that as long as God was honoured the land would be a place of blessing, and the opposite was also true. When God was set aside, not trusted, or obeyed, the land would become a curse. Thus, the people found themselves in exile under the oppressive rule of the Babylonian empire feeling separated and abandoned by God.

This idea of blessing and cursing that was tied to the land was really all about the heart of the people. In a time when everything had fallen apart because the people followed their own

desires and did not love God, when they were suffering the consequences of their decisions, God comes to the people and says, "I will change your situation. I will show that I am holy through you so that all nations will know that I am God and you are my people."

And how will God do this? God will gather them up from the nations, sprinkle clean water on them, and they will be clean; God will cleanse them from all their impurities and from all their idols. God will give them a new heart and put a new spirit in them; God will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. And God will put the Spirit in them and move them to follow God's decrees and be careful to keep God's laws."

God's desire is to be in relationship with us and has proven that he will go to great lengths to be in relationship with us. In this passage the agent for change is water that cleanses and causes a change of heart. As Christians who know the story of Jesus, we know just how far God will go to change hearts and be in relationship with us. God is to be respected and honoured, but God doesn't just want respect and honour, God wants to be loved and to love us back. God wants to heal us, our community, the nation, and the world. The healing is about wholeness of body, mind, and spirit, in people and all creation.

It does not mean that everything is going to be okay. Just witnessing what we are today, we know that everything is not okay. What it does mean is that if we are willing to listen to God, to love God with our entire being, we will learn things about ourselves, our church and about our faith that will remain with us always. One thing that is constant is God's presence in times of crisis and in times of rejoicing. God desires our hearts and minds to be focused on God's will and call on our lives.

If you want a change of heart and receive a new spirit, pray for it, and expect that God will hear your prayer. Realize that this change of heart is given so that we can live better lives in Christ, following the decrees of God, and being careful to keep God's statutes. If we live in this way our lives will be a testament to God's holiness and God's work in the world. Living in right relationship with

God's presence is no longer tied to the land but is now a promise to all God's people through faith in Jesus Christ. It is through Jesus that we are God's people and we know God to be our God. As you wash your hands, stand in the shower, or encounter water in other ways, may it be a reminder that God can and is changing hearts, have given you a new spirit, and you are God's beloved.

Closing Prayer

Loving and forgiving God, we give thanks for your will and desire to change hearts, to replace our hearts of stone with hearts that see the need in the world. May we be a prayerful people in this time when we are unable to be physically present with others that we know and love and when helping a stranger is more difficult than ever.

May this be a time where we can be quiet with you, asking for you to change our hearts in ways that bring us more closely in relationship with you and all people. Give us a new spirit, so that we can hear, see, and feel, the Holy Spirit moving in us and in the world.

And we pray for the world, for those who are putting themselves at risk for the well-being of others. We pray for families and individuals who are distressed, grieving, tired. Lord we feel that we are in a type of exile. May it be an opportunity to learn about ourselves, our church, and our faith.

Bring healing to our world and to our lives. We ask in the precious and strong name of Jesus. Amen.

Hymn

I, the Lord of sea and sky

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Blessing

Go now in peace, for nothing can separate you
from the love of God in Christ Jesus.