

Title: "When All Is Stripped Away"

Text: Ezekiel 11:16-25

In this last phase of our sermon series on "Living Faith in 3D,"
-we are exploring what we might call "the deep dimension" of
God's love."

-That is, how do we grasp God's love when we are in "deep
do-do?"

-When we are in the depths of discouragement or despair?

This is how the Israelites felt in that period of their history
known as "the Exile."

-Last week we saw that through the Prophet Jeremiah,
God told His people that because of their sin and rebellion,
-He was going to expel them from the Promised Land for a
period of 70 years.

-He also told them that He was going to do this by bringing the
Babylonians against them,
-and that King Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, would
cart them off into exile in Babylon. (Show Picture)

This enforced exile was the lowest period of Israel's life prior
to the coming of Christ.

-They lost their home in the land of Promise.

-Their capital City of Jerusalem was destroyed.

-Even the Temple of God itself was completely demolished.

And the worst thing was, God told them that He was the One
who was doing this to them.

So how do God's people grasp God's love when they are in
the depths of despair,

-and when it is God who says He has led them into that
deep, dark valley?

Listen today to the Prophet Ezekiel, chapter 11:16-25.

-Ezekiel was among the Jews exiled to Babylon,
and it was there among the exiles that he received his call
from God to be a prophet, and to speak God's word to
the exiles while there were in Babylon.

-So listen to this word from the Lord to the exiles in Ezekiel 11.

I want to begin today by showing you some images of Syrian refugees in our world today.

- These images are much like what deportation of the Jews in Jeremiah and Ezekiel's day looked like as they were being marched off into exile in Babylon.

And now look at what these refugees from Syria are fleeing and leaving behind.

- These images are much like what the Babylonians did to Jerusalem and the other cities, towns, and villages of Judah and Israel in the ancient world.

You and I go through dark times in our lives.

- Everyone of us suffers various kinds of ills in this world that can put us in a deep dark place.
- But this kind of massive, group suffering in which whole cities are obliterated, we can hardly imagine it.
- It's 9/11 times 1000.

It's an experience of having everything that you ever trusted in for security in your life stripped away from you.

- The roof over your head, the bank that held your accounts.
- Electricity, refrigeration gone,
- no more hot showers, maybe no more running water at all.
- No more grocery store where you always could get food.
- No more schools where your kids were taught.
- The church where you gathered for worship is rubble.

How would you feel if all of that was suddenly stripped away?

- I mean literally wiped out like that, nothing left to lean on,
-no place left to go to.
- What if you ended up walking for days and days and days only to live in a tent like this,
-among thousands of other displaced people living in thousands of other tents like this?

I want us to try and grasp a little smidgen of what this must feel like,

- and then wrestle with where is God in experiences like this.

God called Ezekiel to be a prophet in just such a time as this.

-And Ezekiel was one of those people who was exiled.

He could have looked just like that when he was called!

-He was among those who had experienced the devastation of their lives,

-a devastation which God claims to be responsible for!

-And then God shows up and calls him to be His spokesman.

It hardly seems fair.

-Ezekiel was grieving the loss of everything he had ever known and depended on,

-and was now forced to live in the country and among the very people who had destroyed his nation and home land.

So you can imagine he would be anguished and angry at all that had befallen him,

-and angry at the Babylonians who had wrecked his life,

-and angry at God for not only letting this happen but for telling the Jews through Jeremiah that He was doing this to them as a disciplinary punishment for their own sins.

And now God shows up and calls him to be a prophet, and to speak God's words to the people.

-If it were me, I might well have said, "No. Go find somebody else."

But through a vivid and amazing vision of God riding on a chariot of fire carried along by cherubim and seraphim,

-Ezekiel is stunned by God's glory and can only bow in submission and say, "Yes, Lord, whatever you want."

And so right there in exile, amidst this lost and bereaved people of God, and being one of the bereaved himself,

-Ezekiel becomes God's prophet.

1. And the first thing I want us to notice today as we wrestle with where is God in these times of devastation, -is that God is right there in the midst of it with us.

Ezekiel might not have been too happy with God at this point in his life,

-and the call to be God's prophet might not have been what he really felt like doing at this point in his life.

- But the fact that God was there calling him was his first clue that God was actually present with them.
- And the fact that he was being called to be a prophet was his second clue that God wanted to actually speak to His people.
- And that fact gave him his third clue that God still considered them to BE His people.
- He still cared about them!
- He had not abandoned them.

It's even amazing that in the visions Ezekiel is given, even here in this passage in verse 22,

- God reveals himself riding on this chariot with wheels which is being carried along by cherubim,
- these huge angelic beings with six wings and four heads and eyes all over the place.

It's a vision of God's mobility!

- God is not stuck back in Palestine in the Promised Land.
- No, he is right there with them in Babylon.
- It is not as though God has sent His people out of the promised land, saying, "Good luck in Babylon. I'll see you in 70 years. We'll see how it all turns out."

No, God is with them, and gives Ezekiel these visions of his mobility, to go and be anywhere He wants in this world, -and to be with His people where ever they are scattered in this world.

2. And then secondly, I want us to notice the first thing God says through Ezekiel in this passage.

He says, *"Although I sent them far away among the nations and scattered them among the countries, yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone."*

My friends, that word "sanctuary" is an amazing word here. -A sanctuary is a consecrated place where God dwells with His people.

- The very first sanctuary in the Bible was the Garden of Eden.
 - It was the place God created and consecrated to dwell together with us.
- Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, that relationship with God was broken, and they had to leave that sanctuary.

But ever since God has been seeking to restore that relationship and create a new sanctuary where we can dwell with Him in right relationship again.

And the Promised Land was another biblical sanctuary God set aside for this purpose.

- It was to be a consecrated realm where God would dwell with His people.
- And they would live in covenant with Him, obeying His Laws and receiving His blessings, and being a light to the nations.

But as we have seen, God's people once again sinned and broke their covenant with God, again and again actually.

- And now in Ezekiel's day, they have once again expelled from the sanctuary.
 - Just like Adam and Eve were sent out of the Garden of Eden.

But here is the amazing thing God says through Ezekiel:

"Yet for a little while now, I have been a sanctuary for them."

"And it doesn't matter where they are," God says. "No matter how far and wide they are scattered.

-I am a sanctuary for them."

"So even if everything else is stripped away.

-Even if the Promised Land is far, far away and lies in ruins.

-Even if the Temple in Jerusalem is leveled to the ground.

-That is not the true sanctuary for my people.

-I am the true sanctuary.

-And I am right here with you, ready to be your refuge."

And my friends, that is good news, and it is good news that is true for all of us.

We may not have lost everything around us like the Jews of Ezekiel's day, or the Syrians in particular in our day,

-but all suffering involves a process of “stripping away” the things we lean and depend on.

We don't even realize how much we depend on our body and trust in it to do things for us every day.

-But when some part of our body gets hurt, gives out, or gets diseased, or causes us pain, we are impaired.

We can't do some of the things we used to take for granted doing.

-Some of our mobility is stripped away, or our strength, or our mental acuity.

And emotional pain and suffering can do the same.

-Grief and loss mean that something has been taken away from us,

-and that stripping can mean that life will never be the same for us.

All of life's sufferings strip us of something that we have leaned on or depended on.

-And it is often in that very place that we discover our need to lean on God.

It is in that very place of “deep need” that God shows up for us and reveals that His love is “deeper still.”

-It is then that like Ezekiel, we discover that He is with us.

-That He actually wants to speak to us, and even through us.

-We discover that He Himself is our sanctuary and refuge.

Israel had gotten to a place in their corporate life, where extreme measures were necessary to draw them back to God.

-Their hearts had become so hard towards God and towards one another that, as God says here in verse 19,

-He had to take their hearts of stone, and literally break them in order to soften them up again.

-He had to strip them of everything else they were depending on, in order to draw them back into a dependence on Him, who alone was worthy of their trust.

The words God speaks to His people through Ezekiel here are

words of restoration and encouragement.

Their sin and the hardness of their hearts was very real.

- They needed open heart surgery, it was serious.
- But their surgeon was working for their salvation, their wholeness, their health.

And in their deepest, darkest valley He was there beside them.

- He was calling them to a new kind of life together with him.
- A life in which He would give them a new Spirit, and a new heart.

And He would bring them back to the Land of Promise with a new covenant.

- And they would cleanse the sanctuary of the Promised Land from all of the idols and images they had been depending on.
- And they would be His people, and He would be their God.

This new covenant, and this new heart, and this new Spirit were ultimately given to us in Jesus Christ.

- It was His death on the cross that finally took care of the sin that so easily entangles us.
- It was His resurrection victory that finally overcame death and hell.
- It was that atoning sacrifice for us that enabled us to be cleansed and washed,
 - so that these very hearts of ours could become sanctuaries in which God could come and dwell by His Spirit.

And if God is now living in you by His Spirit,

- then no matter where you are, His sanctuary is within you.
- No matter what life throws at you, His sanctuary is there for you.
- No matter what else gets stripped away from you, God is there to be leaned on and depended on.

And He can even take the worst sufferings that befall us,

- and somehow use them to soften our hearts, towards Him and towards others.

- He can use suffering to shape in us greater humility,
 - deeper compassion,
 - a greater thankfulness for all the little blessings and signs of beauty along the way.

- He can give us a wider acceptance of other people in all their complexity,
 - and can even create in us a depth of joy and peace which comes only from finding in Him our sanctuary.

God Himself is the good news of the Gospel. Let us pray.