

I believe that the Bible has one long story line. That story line begins in Genesis and ends in Revelation. And that story line is the story of God's love for God's people and our attempts (periodically successful – mostly failed) to love God back.

One of the things that I love about this Easter Vigil service is that it tells this story line in miniature. The readings that we have just heard – from Genesis to Ezekiel – remind us how God loves this world – and how we, as humans, struggle to love God. Despite our failures, God reaches out again and again and again. God continually tries new ways to convey God's love for us.

Tonight, I want to focus on one particular passage – the first passage we heard from the prophet Ezekiel. The one where God, speaking through Ezekiel, tells the people that he will take their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh. It is a wonderful passage, and I fear that it gets eclipsed by the more famous Ezekiel passage about the dry bones.

So tonight, let's explore this passage. We'll see what it tells us about God's love for us and how it encourages us to love God.

First, there are two things that you really need to know – the setting and the meaning of heart in that ancient time and place.

Ezekiel prophesied to the people of Israel when they were in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem had already been destroyed, the temple razed, and many people killed. The young and the strong were carried to Babylon as slaves. It is in that context that Ezekiel spoke these words. And, these words follow many chapters of Ezekiel laying out how the people got into this mess in the first place.

God, speaking through Ezekiel, says that the people have defiled the land – that their failure to love God and worship God in the right ways has not only defiled the temple, it has defiled the very ground of the earth. They defiled the earth by failing to love God – and that failure is demonstrated by worshiping falsely and mistreating those around them who were poor and in need. And that defilement of the ground -- the same ground, by the way, that God used to make Adam, way back Genesis 2 – is what leads to the exile. In fact, in Leviticus 18, God says "if you defile the land, it will vomit you out."

After many chapters of reading the people the riot act, of laying out for them all the ways that their behavior has failed to live up to God's expectations – Ezekiel finally gives the people a word of hope from God. God will give the people a new land. He will cleanse them from their sins. And to help them continue in the right paths, He will give them new hearts.

Which brings us to the other thing that we really need to know in order to understand this passage. For us, the heart is the seat of emotions. We equate hearts with love, with passion, with all of our emotions, really. If you close your eyes and imagine a typical Valentine's Day card, you'll know what I mean.

However, for the people of ancient Israel, the heart functioned more as the seat of knowledge, will, or decision making. The activities we equate with our brains – they equated with their hearts.

So, for the people of Israel, their hearts of stone did not prevent them from loving God (at least not in the emotive sense) – their hearts of stone prevented them from knowing God and from doing the right things – acting justly and righteously – acting like God's people.

So, God tells them that he will take their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh. The situation is so desperate that he will give them a heart transplant! And, he will breathe his spirit into them. And, the infusion of God's spirit, combined with their new fleshy, responsive hearts, will make them able to be fully loving and fully engaged in relationship with God and with the people they encounter. Their new hearts and their new spirits will help them to live fully into the covenant that God calls them to again and again.

One of the reasons that I love this passage is because many years ago, I had a life-changing experience with it. I was in a difficult situation – the details of it don't really matter. What matters is that my way of coping with that difficult situation was to harden my heart. I was tired of the pain that I was experiencing. I was tired of the doubt that the situation was filling me with. And so, I simply shut myself down. I went through the motions of living my life – but I stopped engaging. It was simply too painful.

One day, I was sitting on the couch, reading the Bible, when I stumbled onto this passage from Ezekiel. As I read these very words, I felt my heart break open. My heart of stone was transformed into a heart of flesh. As I read these words, I felt as though God were speaking directly to me. I think I cried for hours. And, in the midst of those hours of prayer and tears and the re-enfleshment of my heart, I began to see a way forward and a way through the challenges.

It is easy to harden our hearts. There is so much around us that is overwhelming and challenging – some of us live with grief. Others live with financial challenges. For some of us, there is pain in broken relationships. Others of us are overwhelmed by the pain we see in the world around us. It is easy to harden our hearts.

As we wait in vigil for the resurrection, I want to remind you that that story of God's love for us as it's laid out in Scripture does not end with the Book of Revelation. God continues to love us. God continues to wait for us to respond. That ongoing love of God for the world is the story that we will celebrate in a few minutes when our waiting in vigil for the resurrection ends and Easter arrives.

God loves you. And, if your heart is hardened, God is waiting to give you a new heart and a new spirit. This night, as we prepare to celebrate the feast of the resurrection, I invite you to make these words your own. Hear God speaking to you. Allow God to break your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.