

Reflection on the Scripture: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

[\[The video of the reflection.\]](#)

It was a little weird last week to be back in the pulpit at the church. The mask was weird. Making sure that the computer was in synch with where I was in the service was weird. You guys know how unreliable I am at following the bulletin.

You should see me trying to follow a bulletin and a power point! Folks were really spread out, as we needed to be, so I had a much wider sweep to make eye contact. It was nice to be in the sanctuary again, with the beautiful new windows. But it felt a bit unfair. Because not everyone could be there. Plus, the lesson was on Jonah after he gets to Nineveh, and if it wasn't for the pandemic, we would have had a great time working with that story as a group. I had to keep reigning myself in to write the sermon I needed to write, not the one that would have worked so well if we could have done it as a group.

There are so many things these days that seem unfair. Including the Christmas Faire. And no matter how much we feel in our hearts that it's unfair to miss our mother's 91<sup>st</sup> birthday celebration or having our kid come to visit, or getting to spend freshman year in our dorms or getting laid off because our manager couldn't figure out something more creative to do with us when we could have figured it out in two seconds. No matter what feels unfair to us, most of us just keep our mouths shut. Because there are families who have lost people they love to this pandemic. There are nurses and doctors who have barely slept in months and not hugged their kids at all. There are people working for minimum wage who are taking abuse because they're asking people to wear masks. There are people whose homes are ash or under water. There are people who run from police not because they are trying to evade arrest but because they are afraid of brutality. You want to talk unfair. That's unfair. Not being able to preach a sermon about Jonah the way you want to on a beautiful September morning in the sanctuary you've been homesick for can scarcely be unfair. Not really. Not compared to everything else.

But still.

Whatever the extra is. It's extra. And I can still remember a life, way back in February, where it wasn't extra. I've said to friends that life during the pandemic is like running in snow. You can do it. But it's so much more inefficient.

I didn't cause climate change. I'm doing everything I can to prevent it. I didn't cause racism in this country. I'm fighting against it. I didn't work for income inequality or globalization. I do everything in my power to make sure that people get a decent wage for their work and CEOs don't get paid appalling multiples of what the rest of the people in their organizations get paid. I paid my taxes willingly, fully and on-time because I know we need FEMA and the CDC and the FDA because hurricanes and pandemics are always going to come eventually.

So yeah. It is unfair. My teeth are on edge because of something that earlier generations ate.

And that is God's point in the reading from Ezekiel. History matters. We don't come into the world unconnected to what has gone before. We arrive in our generation's moment with six chapters of the novel already written.<sup>2</sup>

But we are free to take the story wherever we want it to go from there. We aren't a victim of the first six chapters. We're the authors of the next set of chapters. And that can go however we want. We want to abolish racism? Then we're the ones who have to say to the Marine Corps, "You cannot tell us there are no qualified African Americans to promote to the rank of brigadier general. That's just not statistically possible."<sup>3</sup> We're the ones who need to say to the CEO of Wells Fargo, "There are plenty of African American candidates for executive positions. Apologize and fix your company."<sup>4</sup> We can make sure that any requirements to reduce carbon dioxide come with plans to increase employment for those whose jobs will be effected.

We might not like the stories of racism and climate change we've inherited. But we also inherited the stories of the Normandy landing, and the Marshall Plan and the Civil Rights movement and women's suffrage. You cannot tell me the families who lived through World War I, the 1918 Influenza and the Depression thought life was fair then either. But they kept writing, so we could pick up the story now.

The reading from Ezekiel is God reminding the Israelites living in Babylon having been exiled from their homeland after their country was destroyed in war that God wants everyone to live (Ezekiel 18:4). Instead of saying, in essence, "One strike and you're out." God is saying, "Just turn it around. Repent and the future is yours to write." We hear this reading as one of punishment, and punishment for something we didn't do. It's a story of grace. God is saying everything is possible, anything is possible, a new heart and a new spirit (Ezekiel 18:31) are possible. But we have to repent. We have to admit that we have a role in writing the next part of the story. And we have to admit that we need God's grace. We

have to admit that we have a role in turn it around and we need God's help to do so.

It's completely unfair to God that that is all we have to do. But that's the amazing deal that God is offering us. God is willing to remove the consequences of death

<sup>2</sup> E. L. Allen, "The Book of Ezekiel: Exposition," vol. 6 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1956), 162.

<sup>3</sup> Helene Cooper, "The Few, the Proud, the White: The Marine Corps Balks at Promoting Generals of Color," *New York Times*, August 31, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/31/us/politics/marines-race-general.html> (accessed 24 September 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Hamza Shaban, "Wells Fargo CEO Apologizes after Blaming Shortage of Black Talent for Bank's Lack of Diversity," *Washington Post*, September 23, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/09/23/wells-fargo-ceo-black-employees/> (accessed 24 September 2020).

from those who have considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed (Ezekiel 18:28).<sup>5</sup> Simply repent and ask for grace and it will be given. A new history is ours to write for such a trivial price. It's weird that God should set up such an unfair deal for Godself. But that's all that God is asking of us.