

The Winds of God

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Ezekiel 47:1-12

Then he brought me back to the entrance of the temple; there water was flowing from below the entryway of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east), and the water was flowing down from below the south side of the temple, south of the altar. Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east and the water was trickling out on the south side.

Going on eastward with a cord in his hand, the man measured one thousand cubits and then led me through the water, and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured one thousand and led me through the water, and it was knee-deep. Again he measured one thousand and led me through the water, and it was up to the waist. Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be crossed. He said to me, "Mortal, have you seen this?"

Then he led me back along the bank of the river. As I came back, I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on the one side and on the other. He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish once these waters reach there. It will become fresh, and everything will live where the river goes. People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-gedi to En-eglaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing."

I married into a family in which everyone loves mystery stories. They read them and pass them around. Most of the family reads them in the normal fashion: from the beginning to the end, hurrying along to find out in the end who the culprit is. My father-in-law was the exception. He

always began by reading the last few pages. He wanted to know how it came out. Then he read the rest from the beginning to see how the plot worked itself out to get to the final conclusion he already knew.

At first, it sounds like a crazy way to read a book. But when you stop to think about it, my father-in-law's way of reading mystery stories has much to commend it.

We tend to look at things from beginning to end: from past, to present, to future. If you want to understand something, you study the previous events that produced it. We even have a phrase that we use when we think we understand someone: "I know where you are coming *from*."

What has made this view particularly prevalent in modern society is the success of the physical sciences. In the physical sciences, to "understand" something is to be able to explain its causes. And, when we today speak of "cause," we mean what the ancients called "efficient cause." The efficient cause of a billiard ball's moving into a pocket is that another ball hit it. And the efficient cause of that other ball's movement was that the cue hit it. And the efficient cause of the cue. . . and so on, and, on, always backwards, always into the past, to find the cause of all things.

But that is not the only way to look at reality. In fact, throughout most of history, most of humankind has believed that things are ultimately caused not so much by other events as by a

purpose, not so much by their beginning as by their end. This is what medieval philosophers called the "final cause," or the "teleological cause." Things happen, not merely because something happened before but also, and above all, because they are being called from a future towards which they are moving. Thus, medieval philosophers said that God was the ultimate "cause" of the universe; they meant not only that in the beginning God made all things and set them in motion, as a first efficient cause, but also that God calls all things from the future, as their final teleological cause.

We may find this difficult to understand because to us "cause and effect" are a sequence that follows along chronological lines, always from the past to the present to the future. In this, modernity has been profoundly influenced by the practical success of the physical sciences, which are precisely sciences that study efficient causes.

But, when you stop to think about it, that is not really the way we live our lives. The reason why I came here was not only that an airplane brought me to Albuquerque, and someone met me there. The reason is also that when I was back home, I envisioned and wished my presence here, and so bought a ticket, and so got on a plane that then brought me here. Thus, although in a way the cause of my being here is that I got on that plane, that is true only in a very limited way—as an efficient cause. In fact, the teleological cause is closer to the truth: I got on that plane because I was to be here today.

And so it is with all of us. When we leave our driveway, we determine which way to turn on the basis of where we are going—in other words, the future is the cause of our decision. Even though we do not often express it verbally, we all live the present out of our vision of the future.

That is why in the Bible, although the first three chapters of Genesis speak of the origin of all things, there are many more passages that speak of the end of all things. For each passage that speaks about God's action as the beginning of all things, there are ten that speak of God's purposes as the end of all things.

The same is true when it comes to the questions that stand at the heart of our concern here these days. Yesterday we looked at those questions from the perspective of the origin of the world, of the beginning, of creation. Tonight, it may be well for us to look at that question from the point of view of the end of nature, of its consummation, of its purpose.

That is why a relatively recent book on eschatology has the provocative, but perceptive, title of *Last Things First*. It is in the light of God's purposes that we understand life and death, creation and history. It is not enough to read the Bible "from Genesis to Revelation." We must also learn to read it "from Revelation to Genesis."

That is also why last night I concluded my words with a few of those passages:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.

For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Think again about my father-in-law reading a mystery book and beginning at the end. From the point of view of purely efficient causes, that is a crazy way to read a book. But it is probably much closer to the way the book was written. Most likely, the author decided the solution long before the first word of the book was written. The entire book, from cover to cover, makes clearer sense when you read the story, not simply as the result of dozens of separate events that unfold in chronological order but rather as the result of that final event, which pulls all the rest to itself. If we read the book from page one to the last page, it is not until the last page that we find that the butler did it. But if we have a glimpse at that last page, as my father-in-law was wont to do, then as we read the book we understand things differently. When the phone rings on page five, or when the turkey burns on page fifty, we can have a glimpse of the meaning and purpose of those events in the mind of the author, in light of the fact that the butler did it.

In a way, that is also true about creation, and history, and nature. We can study creation in all its details, limiting ourselves to efficient causes, and think we understand it. We can study historical events thoroughly according to their efficient causes and think we understand them. We can study the laws of nature and their functioning and think we understand nature. But that is like reading the book from page one and coming to page fifty where the turkey burns. We understand that the turkey burns because it was too long in the oven. But in truth, the reason why the turkey burns on page fifty is because on page 250 we are to be told that the butler did it. Likewise, we understand neither nature nor history until we have a glimpse of the end for which creation was made and the purpose towards which history is moving.

I suggest that we ought to read the eschatological passages of Scripture with the same excitement as if we were reading a mystery novel and somehow managed to get a peek at the last page. Reading them, I feel as my father-in-law must have felt when he opened the last chapter of a mystery novel. Aha! The butler did it! So that is what it is all about! Aha! A kingdom of God, where God and the Lamb shall reign forever. A kingdom from all tribes, and peoples, and nations, and languages, in which they shall all be a royal priesthood. A kingdom in which they shall wear their white robes of victory and wave palms of jubilation, celebrating the victory of the Lamb in a multitude of languages, for they are people from every tribe and nation. So that is what it is all about! A Reign of God in which the lion shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them! A Reign of God in which they will not hurt or destroy in God's holy

mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea! So that is what it's all about!

Granted, these are poetic visions that do not really describe God's intended order. But they are, nevertheless, the visions by which we must live if we are not to allow the alternative vision to kill us. That alternative vision we all know. It is the vision with which I grew up as I read Buck Rogers and other similar literature: a vision of a world in which everything is glass and chrome, air conditioning and speed, highways and superhighways, built and crossing each other in layers several stories high; a vision where every process will be planned and controlled, every beach "developed," every island a resort, and every forest a park. A vision where whatever is not clearly useful will be destroyed, and everything will be valued in terms of its use for humankind. A vision where property rights are absolute, and owners are allowed not only to use but also to abuse their property. A vision of a future in which we will no longer be concerned about future generations. In other words, an unsustainable vision of human life as self-sustaining. If that is not the epitome of idolatry, I do not know what it is.

Over against that false vision of life, which in truth is a vision of death, stands the vision of prophets such as those I have just quoted, and in particular the vision of Ezekiel that has been read.

Look again at Ezekiel's vision. In many ways, it is a strange vision. But perhaps that should make it particularly valuable for us today, because quite often what we find strange is precisely what we most need to hear.

I say it is a strange vision, first of all, because it is a vision of a life-giving flood. In much of the Bible, water, especially in large amounts, represents chaos and destruction. Water that is not controlled often spells death. Yet, what Ezekiel here describes is a vision of a flood. At first, the water is ankle-deep. Then it is knee-deep. Then it reaches the waist. Then it is deep enough to swim in. Finally, it becomes "a river that could not be crossed." Up to this point, the reader has thoughts of Noah and the flood, and one even begins to worry about the rainbow and the promise that the earth will never again be destroyed by a flood.

But then it turns out that this apparently uncontrollable flood is not for death but for life. The prophet says:

I saw on the bank of the river a great many trees on the one side and on the other. He said to me: "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah (that is, the southern desert); and when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh. Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes."

Secondly, this vision is strange because the water comes not from the clouds or from the usual springs but from the temple. Unfortunately, too often what comes out of the temple has not been life-giving. Too often we have thought that the function of religion is to regulate

everything, to put everything in line, to make everything conform. If too many developers look at a swamp and see only roads and marinas and hotels, too many religionists look at the many forms that life takes and see only a challenge to bring order and uniformity into it. Witness how much time we spend in General Conference amending its Discipline. We seem to believe that if water is to flow out of our temples, it must be properly channeled, controlled, held within its proper bounds. But in the vision of Ezekiel, the water that flows from the temple flows freely and abundantly and is life-giving.

And thus the vision leads me to wonder: Can our preaching, our teaching, and our living be such that out of today's temples comes water that flows freely, that flows for life, so that wherever it goes what was stagnant will become fresh, so that wherever it goes every living creature that swarms will live?

Finally, the vision is strange because even this river of fresh water, even this river that flows from the very temple of God, does not take over everything. In the middle of this flood of fresh water, Ezekiel says: "But the swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt."

At a time when, right here in this country the salt marshes are being threatened by developers, Ezekiel says that even God's river will respect the salt marshes. They may not be pretty from the point of view of our perverted aesthetics, but they have a function, and they must remain.

Look at the last page of the mystery book: Aha! So that is what it is all about! Yes, according to Ezekiel, that is what it is all about. And if that is what it is all about, that better be what we are about. If we really believe that this is the future towards which God's history is moving, we better live out of that future and not out of some other.

We certainly cannot bring that future about. Too often Christians have spoken of bringing in the Kingdom, as if it were within our power to do so. It is not a matter of finding ways to make the lion lie down with the lamb. Perhaps we could manage to do that through some sort of genetic manipulation. But even if we could, that would be just one more instance of our desire to control the world, to mold everything according to our own master plans.

We cannot bring that future about. But we can live as those who believe that this is indeed God's future, and, because it is God's future, it is also our future. We cannot make the lion and the lamb live together. But we can live as those who know that there is a place in God's final plan for the lion and the lamb, for the leopard and the kid, for the child and the viper, for fresh water and salt marshes.

The problem is that quite often there is a divergence between the future that we think we envision and the future that is really operative in our lives.

Allow me to explain that. Suppose I were to tell you that as soon as I retire, I plan to move to Japan. I love all things Japanese. There is no culture like Japan's; there is no food like Japan's; there is no life like what I expect to live in Japan. I can hardly wait these few years until I retire and can move to Japan. Then you ask me: "What are you doing meanwhile with your free time?" And I say, "Oh, I'm studying Italian!" You laugh. You laugh, because there is a ridiculous incongruity between my professed future and the way I am preparing for it. Most likely, in spite of all my enthusiastic talk about Japan, deep down I do not really believe that I will ever live there.

But then, think about Christians. Think about the Church. We spend so much time talking about the coming Kingdom of God. We pray repeatedly, "Thy Kingdom come." To hear some of our sermons and to read some of our books, you would imagine that we can hardly wait for the Kingdom to come. But are we practicing "Kingdomese"? We proclaim a Kingdom in which the last shall be first. Yet, when I look at the church, I see many of us competing to be ahead of everybody else with just as much zeal as an Olympic competition. We proclaim a Kingdom of peace, a Kingdom of justice, a Kingdom of love. Are we practicing "Kingdomese"?

You see, if I claim I plan to spend the rest of my life in Japan and meanwhile study Italian, the first and most immediate result will be that no one will believe me. If I really want to convince you that Japan is so great, I better begin learning and practicing the language and customs of Japan, or you will not believe me. If we really want the world to believe the proclamation of

the Kingdom, then we better, both as individuals and as a church, we better begin living as a people who are practicing for the Kingdom.

Then, there is a second result. If the time comes when I do move to Japan, and I have not been practicing for it, Japan will not be all that great. I will not understand what people say. I will get indigestion from food to which I am not accustomed. I will get cramps in my legs from sitting on the floor. Likewise, I suspect that if we do not practice for the Kingdom now, we shall be rather uncomfortable when the Kingdom does come!

Thus, stealing a page from my father-in-law, I invite you tonight, read first the last page of the book of nature, read first the last page of the book of life, and know, as the prophets of old already knew: Aha! So that's what it's all about! That is what it is all about!



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