Ezekiel 1:1-28 "A Vision of God"

Introduction

The topic of my sermon this morning is strange. Most sermons today seem to be on how to have victory over too much sin in your life, or weight on your body, or over too little money in the bank, or self-esteem in the heart. We hear sermons on family life, or personal wellness. Sermons on how to use time or "do" friendships. Sermons on loving yourself or managing your money. Sermons on politics and government. Even sermons on how to have victory over Democrats or Republicans are preached. But, as I say, I have a most unusual topic for a sermon these days, and one even more needed than it is unusual.

This morning I want to help you answer the question, "What is God like?"

To do that, I want us to turn to one of the most vivid records in the Bible of a vision of God. It's found in the first chapter of the Old Testament book of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel's situation is an interesting one. A captured Israelite in forced Exile, Ezekiel is a young man of about 30, recently relocated to the most powerful city on earth at the time, and God requires him to begin preaching to His people.

Now, in all honesty, I have to tell you that Ezekiel was "far from an ordinary individual." W.F. Albright described Ezekiel as "one of the greatest spiritual figures of all time, in spite of his tendency to psychic abnormality--a tendency which he shares with many other spiritual leaders of mankind," (From the Stone Age to Christianity, p. 325). The book Ezekiel produced has struck many as rather strange and difficult. In fact, so much so that there was a tradition among the Jewish rabbis of not letting young men read Ezekiel until they were 30, lest they would become discouraged at how hard the Scriptures were to understand and come to despise them.

But as strange as the early parts of this book may sound at first, I don't think that they're that hard to understand, and they are rich in meaning. So here we go. Listen for a moment about God from Ezekiel. Here's the first part of his record of an amazing vision he had one day. I'll let him tell it to you in his own words.

[The Text of Ezekiel 1 was read in the NIV.]

I want you to notice five things from our text that we learn about God.

The first couple are things which this vision clearly teaches and which would have been no news then, but which we need to pay special attention to today. The most fundamental, and maybe the most obvious is this:

1. God is not like us.

This is where we really must begin if we would understand this vision of God, and, more to the point, the God that Ezekiel envisages here.

The Old Testament prophets knew from personal experience that God was not just like you and me. They assumed what theologians call the "otherness of God." So, too, the Psalmist in Psalm 50, verse 21 represents the Lord’s rebuke to one human worshipper, “you thought I was altogether like you.” In fact, the Bible clearly presents
the fact that God is not like us. And the vision that God gave to Ezekiel made this abundantly clear.

If you stop and think about it, though, you see that our non-Christians don’t seem to assume this. Tommy Bolt, a well-known golfer earlier in this century, renowned for both his graceful swing and his terrible temper, once, after lipping six straight putts, shook his fist at the heavens and shouted, “Why don't you come on down and fight like a man!” His frustration was genuine, but his thoughts about God were badly wrong.

Now I don’t know how serious Tommy Bolt was about his view of the nature of God, but others have quite deliberately taught that, in fact, God is just like us. Mormonism, for example, teaches the doctrine of eternal progression. “As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become,” (Lorenzo Snow, Millenial Star, vol. 54). This doctrine does sound like some words in the Bible: “you will be like God.” Those, however, were the words with which Satan tempted the first woman in the garden to disobey God. That disobedience would be rooted in the idea that Godhood was somehow within her grasp. From her heart, to the hands of the idol-maker, to the doctrines of the Mormons, to our own latest disobediences, we cannot claim that this misunderstanding is strange to any of us.

We are especially tempted to make God over in our own image in terms of His character. Toward the end of his life, Henry David Thoreau was visited by a pious friend who kindly inquired, “Henry, have you made your peace with God?” Thoreau replied, “We have never quarrelled.” A few years ago, the movie “Forrest Gump” has the title character being asked “Have you found Jesus yet?”, to which he responded simply “I didn't know I was supposed to be looking for him.” That sums up much of our society today: mired in the hopeless confusion of not knowing God and not even realizing that they don’t know Him.

The relevance of Ezekiel’s vision here should be clear to us as Christians: we must guard against assuming too much. Things which we take to be self-evident, may, in fact, be wrong. As Will Rogers said, “It’s not what you don’t know that will get you in trouble, but what you know for certain that just ain’t so.” We must study scripture to check our tendency to “make God over” in our own image. God is UN-usual. The Bible calls God “holy”. And it is interesting that the Bible does not teach that God merely possesses holiness, as a dispensable attribute, but rather that He is holy.

Therefore, we must show reverence. Throughout Ezekiel’s encounter with God recorded in this first chapter, there is no doubt about this. If you look at the vision presented here, building up throughout it is a palpable sense of awe. Even the reduction to mere writing and the passage of time cannot hide this from us.

Some may remember the scene in “The Wizard of Oz” where Dorothy finally gets into the Emerald City, and then even into the Great Hall to see the Wizard. Once through the door, she and her companions had to go down a long hall, which then turned, leading to an even more imposing one. Their journey finally culminated in a great flaming centerpiece, with a loud booming voice. The story-teller throughout is building the tension, the wonder, the awe. So, too, with the vision presented here in Ezekiel. The only difference is, however, that the Wizard was a fake. The God which Ezekiel encountered is real.

In this vision, the excitement, the wonder and the amazement increases. After the initial storm and the brilliant light (v4), we find a lengthy description of strange creatures
Their presence only heightens our interest. In vv15-21, the attention is deflected away from the creatures themselves to the wheels about and underneath them. From the beginning of the vision, through verse 24, meticulous care is given to recording a most bizarre and almost fantastic spectacle. And yet, we notice with verse 25 comes the realization that this lengthy description so carefully given up through v24 is all intended to lead to something else!

That something else is clearly a representation of God Himself—the God Who is inexhaustible, incomprehensible, almost indescribable. Did you notice Ezekiel’s evident hesitancy to describe what he was seeing? He refers throughout this account of his vision to what “looked like” this or that, what had the “appearance” of this, or the “form” of that, (vv4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 16, 22, 24). As Ezekiel comes to the end of the chapter these verbal stumblings increase in number, as if the penetrating reality slips further and further away from Ezekiel’s ability to describe with language what he was seeing.

So, in verse 28, we see what Ezekiel did when he was confronted with a vision of God: Ezekiel fell face down, even after all his theological training. In this sense, Ezekiel here is like Job in Job 42, where the knowledgable and holy Job feels undone, feels his knowledge is poultry and his holiness taudry when he comes to be in the presence of the One who is Truth and Goodness Himself.

After Blaise Pascal, mathematician, physicist and philosopher, died in 1662, a piece of parchment was found sewn into his coat. This parchment recorded an experience which he had had eight years earlier on November 23, 1654, (interestingly enough, when he was around Ezekiel's age in our passage). It seems that ever since, Pascal had carried it around on his person at all times. On this scrap of paper was written,

_The year of grace 1654. Monday, 23 November . . . . From about half past ten in the evening until half past mid-night._

_FIRE_

'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,' not of philosophers and scholars. Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace.

_God of Jesus Christ._

_God of Jesus Christ. . . . ._

_The world forgotten, and everything except God. . . . ._

'O righteous Father, the world had not known thee, but I have known thee.'

_Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy._

_I have cut myself off from him._

_They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters._

_'My God wilt thou forsake me?.'_ 

_Let me not be cut off from him for ever!_

_'And this is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou has sent.'_

_Jesus Christ._

_Jesus Christ._

_I have cut myself off from him, shunned him, denied him, crucified him._

_Let me never be cut off from him! . . . ._

_Sweet and total renunciation._

_Total submission to Jesus Christ . . . .
For us, too, we must see God not as the old man upstairs, merely a kindly grandfather, a friendly neighbor or pal or chum. He is not like us. Ezekiel was unforgottably reminded of this. So must we be reminded today.

A second thing which we learn about God from this vision of Him is that

**2. God is all-powerful and all-wise.**

As with His unusualness we’ve just considered, so too God’s power and omniscience would have been no news to the Hebrews of the sixth century BC. Ezekiel would have known of and have believed in God’s comprehensive power and wisdom long before he ever had this vision. Nevertheless, for the readers of our own day, we should take careful note of this.

Re-read the body of this vision (vv4-24) and try to picture those creatures being described. [*Perhaps at this point re-insert those verses.*] This strange description has brought everything from strange medieval illustrations to strange modern explanations. Illustrators have tied themselves in knots (almost like trying to follow a Max Escher drawing!) and Erik von Daniken even went so far as to suggest that this is a description of some kind of ancient alien helicopter!

Really, this main section of the vision falls neatly into halves. The first half (vv4-14) is taken up with the living creatures, and the second (vv15-24) with the wheels. In both sets, though, it seems that the details given us in description, while true as recounts of what Ezekiel saw, also had a significance for him greater than those simple descriptions. I think that when Ezekiel read of the living creatures having faces in each direction, he would have seen and understood it to be a representation of all-knowingness of God. And with the mighty wings, out-stretched above them, able to defeat space and time with their movement, Ezekiel would have understood the indescribably great power of God Himself.

Again, this pattern was repeated with the descriptions of the living wheels in vv15-24. Did you notice that these wheels were reported as having eyes? Rather than simply trying to imagine how you would visually represent such a thing to a group of children in Sunday School, expend your imagination on trying to consider the significance. What could be the import of these eyes be? Could they be a reflection of the function of the faces of the living creatures turned in all directions? Now we find eyes which look in every direction. And then the wheels themselves seemed to have the kind of power to move effortlessly and in any direction, the kind of power which seemed to be possessed by the winged creatures as well. Surely the wheels reiterate the presentation of omniscience and omnipotence--of all-seeingness and almightiness that we have already had presented to us in the first half of Ezekiel’s vision. Surely they were showing Ezekiel that God was never limited by ignorance or inability, but that time and space themselves served as no barriers to God.

Now, such thoughts about God were no news to Ezekiel, but they are to many today. Sigmund Freud in his book *Totem and Taboo* said that “At bottom God is nothing more than an exalted father.” Freud recognized the human longing for a parent figure; he noted the desire for approval from an authority figure who was more knowledgable and more powerful than ourselves. Freud recognized that a being like this could interpret our lives, knowing their larger context, and give them meaning. In all of this, Freud may have accurately recognized the human condition. But, friend, did you ever think that that
longing may not simply be of your own making, but that it was actually put in you, and put in you in order to be filled?

For us as Christians here this morning, such a vision of God’s power and wisdom should inspire humility and trust. In my own life, I have found that I could follow different and difficult directions from God when I realized that God loved me more than I loved myself, and that He knows what is best. When we realize God’s love towards us, combined with His knowledge of us and of the future, and add to that same understanding something of His power and ability, we find that here is the God that we can worship, that we can trust, that we must follow, wherever He might lead us.

Friend, what is your reaction to sensing the presence of God? Too often in our churches, we have acted as if casualness toward God was a sign of our intimacy with Him. Yet if we really come to better understand the God of the Bible, as Ezekiel did here, then our trust in Him will be matched by our reverence for Him. For this God is not like us; He is all powerful and all wise. He inspires awe in us.

It is the next truth about God that I think was the point of this vision for Ezekiel. And that is this:

3. **God is NOT limited by circumstances.**

It was perhaps a new thought for the priest-trained, now-exiled Ezekiel that Yahweh, the Lord God, was not limited to Jerusalem! All his life, he had been trained to treasure the Temple and to fear expulsion from it. Exile from God’s Promised Land was a reversal of the Exodus, a divine rejection (see Deut. 28), a kind of death. Surely, Ezekiel and his fellow exiles in Babylon had been taught all this.

As true as it all may have been, even as Jeremiah focused on the death of God’s unfaithful people, so God brought Ezekiel to focus on the hope for resurrection. Even before we get to the celebrated vision of the dry bones in chapter 37, there is hope in this book. It all springs fundamentally from this new understanding of God that Ezekiel was being taught by seeing what he saw here.

Simply put, the question that must have been in their minds was this: in losing their land, had they lost their God? And the unmistakable answer that this vision presents to this question is “No!”

The movement in this chapter--the storm coming, the mobile creatures, the wheels--all seemed to show that God is not bound to a place, whether Jerusalem, or any other. Ezekiel’s ancestors had known that. Abraham had heard the call of God in Ur. The prayers of the distressed children of Israel had been heard by God in Egypt. They had witnessed the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night through the wilderness wanderings. Now God would give these exiles a renewed vision of this.

You could see this vision that Ezekiel had as a vision really of a chariot, with its great wheels and lightning speed. (Remember there were no cars or jets in ancient Mesopotamia!) And even more significant, did you notice that this chariot was very much like the ark of the covenant? With the creatures with wings outstretched, and a place in the middle for God, high and lifted up?

The message to the exiles was clear: God needed no temple. While He clearly had chosen to fill the Temple that Solomon had built for Him in Jerusalem, never had He taught them to think that He was limited in any way to the means which they provided for Him. I wonder if even the rainbow (mentioned in v. 28) would have been a reminder to
them of God's universal concern (see Genesis 9:8-17), unbound by ethnic descent or national location?

Friend, you realize, don’t you, that God is not limited to where you last think you spotted Him. He is not bound by our perceptions of Him, or expectations for Him. He can come in the most surprising ways and at the most amazing times! Now that can be troubling or encouraging, depending on how you feel. It is troubling to you if you thought that you had escaped from the threat of God, if you thought, as John Bunyan put it, that you were “free among the dead, and counted among the number of those that He remembereth no more.” The sinner is always troubled by the approach of God. Like the freshly fallen Adam, his instinct is always to run and hide.

But the news that God is not limited to circumstances is great news if you love God, and have come to think, for whatever reason, that you had put yourself beyond the bounds of His concern. “Sometimes a man . . . is, as he apprehends, so far off from God, that . . . . they think themselves beyond the reach of God’s mercy.” But, writes Bunyan, “When we think his mercy is clean gone, and that ourselves are free among the dead, and of the number that he remembereth no more, then he can reach us . . . . This . . . should encourage them that for the present cannot stand, but that do fly before their guilt: them that feel no help nor stay . . . . I will say before thee, and I prithee hear me, O the length of the saving arm of God! As yet thou art within the reach thereof; do not thou go about to measure arms with God . . . . I mean, do not thou conclude, that because thou canst not reach God by thy short stump, therefore he cannot reach thee with his long arm. Look again, ‘Hast thou an arm like God,’ Job 40:9 . . . ? It becomes thee, when thou canst not perceive that God is within the reach of thy arm, then to believe that thou art within the reach of his; for it is long, and none knows how long,” (John Bunyan, Saints Knowledge; in Works, ed. G. Offor, II.5-6).

Dear Christian friend, beware! Don't be too dependent on particular means: whether an author, speaker, preacher, church, worship style, friend, job or cherished dream. Here’s hope, even if you're separated in time or circumstance from some past place of blessing, from your Jerusalem. Realize the truth of what Paul learned: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord,” (Romans 8:38-39). Things do not have to be the same in order to know blessing. God doesn’t find Himself bound by circumstances; rather circumstances are limited by God. God is not limited by circumstances.

There are a couple of more things about God which are not expressly taught in this passage, but which this passage gives us examples of, which are typical of God as the Bible reveals Him to us, and which are important for us to notice. First,

4. God initiates.

Did you notice the divine initiative here? Again, that God initiates would have been assumed at the time (even though they would have been surprised that He initiated with them even when they were in Babylon!).

We’re not told that this vision came to Ezekiel because of his piety, his studiousness, his fasting and praying, or his holiness. He’s simply presented as “among the exiles,” (v1) when we read that “the heavens were opened.” The passive tense here
isn’t suggesting that it was Ezekiel who was reaching up and ripping them open, but God who was rending them and stooping down. So we read again in v3 that “the word of the Lord came”. We don’t read of Ezekiel going to get it, but of God speaking to Him. Again, in the next verse (v4) we see that the vision itself began with the storm which did what? It came to Ezekiel. He did not set out to experience God; rather God set out to show something of Himself to Ezekiel.

And so again at the end of the vision, as well, after Ezekiel has marvelled over the fantastic sights he has beheld in the storm and the creatures and the wheels, we read in v25, “Then there came a voice.” So as the word of God had come, as the storm had come, as the living creatures and chariot had come, so, too, here the voice came. And it came, we read in v28, because “of one speaking.”

Francis Schaeffer entitled one of his books He is There and He is Not Silent. To Ezekiel here, God was not being quiet. He was not sitting out somewhere in sulking silence, but He came in initiating love; he spoke. Like Moses and the burning bush, and Isaiah in the temple, and Paul on the road to Damascus, it is the human part to hear and respond; it is God’s to come and to speak. God did with Ezekiel here in this vision what God always did: God took the initiative.

If you are hearing this message today as a non-Christian, I urge you most solemnly: Be responsive to God's advances. God does delight in forgiving sins of those who repent and trust in Him. Some people find it inconceivable that God could care for them, but friends, the inconceivable in this case is true.

Once when Julia Ward Howe, well-known crusader for women's rights, and the author of “the Battle Hymn of the Republic”, invited a certain senator to come and meet an up-and-coming young actor, the senator wrote back, “The truth is, I have got beyond taking an interest in individuals.” Mrs. Howe commented in her diary: “God Almighty has not got so far.” Thank God, that's true. But friend, be responsive. Cherish any inkling of true faith. Don't be presumptuous. The decision that we are called to make to follow Christ is costly, and it is urgent. And it is urgent partly because God is not always initiating in the same way. Who can deny that although whoever will may come, people are often disinterested. There are seasons of greater and lesser openness and concern about matters of the spirit in people’s lives.

As Christians, the great truth of God taking the initiative with us should make us humble and prayerful. As we recall that it was He who called us, and that we did not call ourselves, we find our own opinion of ourselves and our goodness declining even while the vision of God, and of His glorious grace increases. And so our response is to praise Him, and to humbly come in prayer and supplication to the One Who takes initiative, Who will come, and Who will save.

God initiates.

Finally, notice that

5. God communicates.

Communication is really at the heart of this chapter. As surprising as it may be to us, Ezekiel's vision climaxes in voice. The order here if we follow this chapter is one of sight, then sound, then speech. Israel’s God was not a mute idol; He was a God who had shaped His people by His Word. And so He would again with these exiles in Babylon.
It is striking to see this vision build as it does, with strange detail and significant descriptions of things that Ezekiel saw, only to have it then culminate with something that he heard. Now we wouldn’t do it this way. Today, we are creatures of show and spectacle, impatient with the curse of faith; desirous to replace it with what we can see. But until we come to the Heavenly City, we are not in a position to lay aside faith for sight, and so we must content ourselves with faith in what we hear, rather than simply the more immediate seductive sights that we can see.

It seems strange to us, but so it was here--this vision climaxed with a voice! After the splendour of vv1-24, the creatures lowered their wings in v25 as if in expectation that One greater than themselves was approaching. So He was. But He came not swaggering into sight, but rather speaking from on high, even to Ezekiel.

The God of the Bible, you see, wants not mere adoration from a distance, but personal relationship. He seeks not mere encounter and sensation, but covenant love.

And what of you? If you honestly evaluate your own spiritual life, do you find yourself satisfied with mere sensation? Don’t be. God wants more than that. He wants a relationship with you, and verbal communication is essential for relationship. That verbal communication can be had even by the deaf and the mute, by the blind and the illiterate. Verbal need not mean logically complex, or mere words; but it must include some kind of transfer of information, with an ability to reflect on the one speaking, and the one hearing.

I know that some of you may object that what I am saying is self-evidently false, because, you may say, you have a wonderful relationship with your dog, and he doesn't talk. But, my friend, imagine this--what if you got home today, and your dog did talk to you? I suggest that you would quickly and certainly enter a new level of relationship, so significantly different from the “good dog’s” and “roll over’s” that went before, that, in comparison, you may feel that your earlier relationship was no relationship at all.

What I am urging is that you not be satisfied with mere superstition, with reverence to a mute god. This vision of Ezekiel, and the Christian Scriptures as a whole, are united in presenting the true God as a God who communicates.

So we Christians must never discount the importance of that communication. We must not do anything to detract in our worship, or in any aspect of our lives from the centrality of the Word of God. How much time have you spent reading the Word today? How much time have you spent reflecting on it? How much time do we in our church, or you in the church you come from, spend reading the Scriptures in our public services? Do our announcements and songs take longer than our speaking our prayers to Him, and hearing His Scriptures read? If so, what does this say about our understanding of God? Who is the God that we really are worshipping? Is He the God who spoke to Ezekiel?

Friend, never underestimate the seminal power of the Word of God. People often asked Luther how he did the reformation. He explained, “I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept . . .  the Word [worked]. I did nothing. The Word did it all,” (see Timothy George, Theology of the Reformers, p. 53). The centerpiece of our Christian worship and lives must be hearing the Word with heart-obedience and with prayer.

So in our churches, we must realize the importance of preaching, Scripture reading and prayer over vague notions of “worshipful experiences.” No amount of purported emotional engagement will ever make up for stopping up our ears to Him.
Have you ever had a friend who was too busy, who just wouldn’t stop and listen and talk? It takes a toll on the relationship, doesn’t it? Don’t let that be your situation with God. The true God, the God that Ezekiel encountered here in chapter 1 is a God who communicates.

Conclusion
A. W. Tozer, in the first chapter of his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, wrote that “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. . . . . The gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God.”

If you have any hesitation about the truth of this statement, just go down the list of things we've said this morning. What difference does it make
--if you think that God is just like you?
--if you don't think that God is wise or able?
--if you decide that God is limited to this place, or that situation?
--if you think that He simply stands and waits for YOUR initiative?
--or if you think that He's mute--that there's no way you can know what God thinks about you, life & the universe? What difference does it make?
All the difference in the world--and more. Let us pray.

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