

June 28, 2020

Psalm 141

Ezekiel 11: 17-20

The Overhaul
The Reverend Jay Sanderford

There is a prehistoric painting on the wall of a cave in northern Spain. This particular drawing from 10,000 years before the birth of Christ is of a great woolly mammoth, an enormous lumbering beast, now extinct, that bore a remarkable resemblance to the elephant.¹ What is so fascinating about this one drawing from *El Pindal Cave* is that right at the place on the drawing where the giant animal's heart would have been situated in his body, there is a red, heart-shaped spot that looks remarkably like a big valentine. Keep in mind that this drawing is more than 12,000 years old, and it is possible to recognize how ancient and ingrained in our human imagination is the concept of the heart as the seed, the origin and center of the life-force, of being life itself.²

Speed ahead eight thousand years to the world of the ancient Israelites and to the first references to the heart in our Bible. Open the sixth chapter of Genesis and there, in the story of Noah and the ark is the first mention of the heart. We are so giddy in love with the thought of lions and deer sauntering two-by-two up the gangplank of the ark, and of the stunning picture of the rainbow appearing at the end of the flood, we easily forget that this is really a sobering story about God's disappointment with the behavior of the entire human race:

“The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that {God} (sic) had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved [the Lord] (sic) to [God's] (sic) heart” (Genesis 6:5-6 NRSV).

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, both God and humans are understood to have hearts. For the Biblical writers, one's heart is a person's whole character and personality and it is to the heart that God speaks and reveals God's divine purpose. In the Bible we find hundreds of stories and texts that describe the heart in multitude of ways, but as always central to the core of being human: a sad heart, a proud heart, a glad heart, an upright heart, a trembling heart, a clean heart, a faithful heart or a fearful heart. God says in Jeremiah,

¹ Atlas Obscura, El Pindal Cave, Pimiango, Spain, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/el-pindal-cave>.

² Gail Godwin, Heart (Harper Collins, 2001), pp. 19-20.

“I will give [my people] (sic) a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart” (Jeremiah 24.7).

The Italians have a musical notation not found in any other language: *tempo giusto* ‘the right tempo.’ It means a steady, normal, between 66 and 76 on the metronome. *Tempo giusto* is the appropriate beat of the human heart.”

We know well that the human heart is the seat of human wisdom and the well-spring of compassion, but it also is the place from which the most loathsome, good-for-nothing of human schemes can emerge, accompanied with the most self-righteous of rationalizations or blatant disregard of the intrinsic value of all human lives. In God’s heart, there never is any sign of hopelessness or mean-spiritedness, but even God’s heart can be filled with distress and anguish and fury as well as gladness. Thankfully, God’s heart is subject to being softened by compassion as people join their lives with God’s purposes for a flourishing relationship, equity among the diversity of peoples and an active engagement with the raw needs of the world and its peoples.

A woman was active in a former congregation; she distinguished herself with a wry wit, a depth of wisdom and a stubborn devotion to equity in local community affairs. Over several years, sadly, she developed a heart condition known as calcific pericarditis. With this unique condition, the pericardium – which is the membrane surrounding the heart – experiences a steady accumulation of calcium – which hardens and prevents the heart from pumping properly. It’s rather unique and rare: a heart that seems to be turning to stone.

In story after story in the Bible, God transforms human hearts. That is the powerful promise of the passage from Ezekiel that was read a few moments ago. As it had been in the days preceding the great flood, the people of God, the community of Israel, had blundered and gone astray. Jerusalem, the beautiful capital was destroyed, leveled by a horde of invaders. The people had, in fact, been taken into exile to Babylon as what was seen by the prophet to be a consequence of their faithlessness.

- ▶ The commandments of God held no sway
- ▶ The elites dominated the other people unfairly
- ▶ Micro-aggressions—insults, innuendo, blatantly racial assertions—were common
- ▶ Injustice reigned supreme and the needs of the hungry, poor, homeless, broken and forgotten, were ignored
- ▶ The heart of the people had turned to stone – had calcified.

But Ezekiel, who usually delivered messages of doom and gloom, had an extraordinary message of hope and restoration to share.

“I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God” (Ezekiel 11:17-20).



God's prescription, Ezekiel's prophecy: a cardiac transplant. The heart of stone would be removed and a new heart - warm and vital - a heart of flesh - would be placed within the corporate body of the people so that they would live to the glory of God.

"How is your heart?" I recently asked a friend. She's a lead engineer for an international manufacturing firm that builds sophisticated scientific instruments—mass spectrometers and the like. She has been navigating tricky Covid-19 waters, full of dangerous corporate cross-currents and steep financial drops, all while enduring trying periods of overwork, dissension in her team, exhausting global travel and personal tumult. She's been circling the event horizon of burnout while bringing a colossal labor of love and enormous corporate profit to reality. And doing this against the backdrop of an epic pandemic and an overdue crisis of racial reckoning. Her answer, stunning and heartbreaking, came swiftly, wholeheartedly, the way words often leave children's lips simple and sincere: "My heart is too broken to *be* a heart," she replied. "Look around, we've set our country on fire. Again."

So, we sit together now in bewildered solidarity, and mourn the immense loss of human life in the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding assault of anti-black violence that highlights a long-standing sickness in our American body politic. The killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and Rashard Brooks were heart-rending events on every level. So was a white woman's flagrant attempt to coerce Christian Cooper in New York City's Central Park. Claiming national attention in part because of compelling video evidence, the images show the way some white people feel entitled to use violence and intimidation to control, and even kill, black people. "My heart is too broken to *be* a heart."

Like so many people of faith whose hearts are open, my friend was deeply saddened, morally enraged, and spiritually crushed by all this. She wears the justified grief caused by these events as a heavy garment of holy lament. Something powerful was erupting from deep within. Lament, we know, is a ruggedly honest statement that something is profoundly wrong or that someone who is dearly loved is now absent. In our family rooms, classrooms, performance spaces, sanctuaries and work places, fresh cries of personal and communal lament are emerging. "My heart is too broken to *be* a heart."

We know from experience that lament expresses itself in many forms: groans, generous tears, long periods of silence, outbursts of rage, quiet questioning, bittersweet recollection and long, sweaty nights of turbulent tossing and turning. We lament because people matter so greatly to us. We lament because values such as equity, human dignity and the presumption of safety matter to us. We lament because there remains deep inside us an

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unquenchable hope that today's pain will not completely swallow tomorrow's possibilities of transformation, as hard as that process might be.

It is astounding just how delicate our human bodies can be. We have fragile bones that break, fragile lungs that collapse under the damaging weight of a novel virus, fragile hearts that skip beats, and fragile minds that seize and sputter as we age. Our fragile flesh pushes us into selfish greed, succumbs to lust, fixates on wealth, drives us to narcissism or defensiveness or fury or self-harm. This year our fleshly tendencies have been on full display on the public stage, as "alternative facts" are celebrated as truth, science is exchanged with wishful thinking, a vision for respect-filled public safety languishes, the pursuit of racial equity is undercut by partisan posturing, the symbols of our Christian faith are appropriated for political gain and dishonesty is touted as a virtue. Are our hearts too broken to be hearts?

Honestly, in this moment, it seems like our flesh has a gigantic design flaw built into it, like a car that deserves a manufacturer's recall. Surely our creator must be tempted at times just to leave the old junker by the side of the road and walk away as our friend Christine Chakoian has observed.³ How many times can we call AAA? How many times do we expect to get rescued, to be hauled back to the repair shop for an overhaul?

But time and again, God intercedes so that we might flourish. Our creator has made a pledge to us: God will keep the body, but put in a new engine. That's what I see in the promise in Ezekiel:

"I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord" (Ezekiel 37:14 NRSV).

What does it look like to have the Spirit of the Lord within us? The only unblemished model for us is Jesus the Christ; all other examples, while instructive, are compromised. In Romans it is God's Spirit that promises to restart our defective being:

"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you" (Romans 8:11 NRSV).

If we really rely on the Spirit of Christ to guide our decisions and thrust us forward, then that holy catalyst can replace the weaknesses of our fleshly mortal selves.

I don't know anyone who does this effortlessly, but I've watched people come close. It is a marvel to observe: self-control that serves the greater good, compassion that weeps with those who weep, persistence that persists to the very end, humility that no human ego can produce. Nor do I know any community that does this work flawlessly, but I see congregations stepping into this opening to equip members to own the practical importance of their faith in their reach and work for an anti-racist community and world.

³ Christine Chakoian, [Living by the Word: the Spirit of the Lord in Us](#), The Christian Century, March 31 2017.



I want to be like Jesus. I want our community of faith to be that beloved community that welcomes all, opposes injustice, and disparages no one. To highlight the words of my colleagues Rick Spalding and Melissa Anne Rogers, I want to be part of a community of faith that exists as a means of bending the course of human history toward the places to which Jesus points us, and toward the people to whom Jesus directs us. But the only way I have a remote chance of coming near these stubborn hopes is to stop fantasizing I can repair myself. The only way to restart is to acknowledge the design flaw in my own lousy self--and pray that the one who created me hasn't given up on me yet.

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