

Magnificent Failure

Ezekiel 1:1-28

In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin), the word of the LORD came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the LORD was on him there.

As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber. In the middle of it was something like four living creatures. This was their appearance: they were of human form. Each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: their wings touched one another; each of them moved straight ahead, without turning as they moved. As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle; such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. Each moved straight ahead; wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. In the middle of the living creatures there was something that looked like burning coals of fire, like torches moving to and fro among the living creatures; the fire was bright, and lightning issued from the fire. The living creatures darted to and fro, like a flash of lightning.

As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl; and the four had the same form, their construction being something like a wheel within a wheel. When they moved, they moved in any of the four directions without veering as they moved. Their rims were tall and awesome, for the rims of all four were full of eyes all round. When the living creatures moved, the wheels moved beside them; and when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. Wherever the spirit would go, they went, and the wheels rose along with them; for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. When they moved, the others moved; when they stopped, the others stopped; and when they rose

from the earth, the wheels rose along with them; for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

Over the heads of the living creatures there was something like a dome, shining like crystal, spread out above their heads. Under the dome their wings were stretched out straight, one towards another; and each of the creatures had two wings covering its body. When they moved, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the thunder of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army; when they stopped, they let down their wings. And there came a voice from above the dome over their heads; when they stopped, they let down their wings.

And above the dome over their heads there was something like a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was something that seemed like a human form. Upwards from what appeared like the loins I saw something like gleaming amber, something that looked like fire enclosed all round; and downwards from what looked like the loins I saw something that looked like fire, and there was a splendour all round. Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendour all round. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.

When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking.

So... Was he just nuts? Was Ezekiel just nuts? He's just sitting around, hanging out by the river having a nice day, when he's just struck with this absolutely bizarre vision. First he sees this storm brewing, and then out of the storm emerge these four creatures. And they look sort of like people, sort of- except they have wings and hooves for feet. Now, under the wings they have hands...that's comforting. That's normal. But then when you look back of up at their heads it's not good- their heads have four sides, four faces. One face is human, one is a lion, one is an ox, and the last is an eagle.

And they're not just sitting there- no, they're darting all around. And it's not just the wings. They're riding these weird sci-fi motorcycle things. Each of them has a wheel underneath them- only it's not a simple wheel, but a wheel within a wheel.

And then you start wondering, well this is all well and good- but what if it rains? What if it rains on them? Well no problem! Because above them there's this thingy- there's a dome sheltering over them like a giant golf umbrella. Only it's no ordinary umbrella because it's got a giant chair on top of it. And in the chair, the throne, is sitting something so bright, Ezekiel can't even begin to see it- other than to say there is splendor and glory just spilling out, pouring out.

Now, I know a lot of us sitting here this morning lived through the 60's and 70's. I know that. You played the White Album backwards; you gave the world pet rocks, which I still do not get. You lived through Frank Zappa for goodness sakes, whose music is still some of the strangest stuff you will ever hear. But even still, even for YOU people this is some pretty weird stuff.

Was he just crazy?

You could understand if he was. He was a survivor of one of the most devastating cataclysms in history- something known as the Babylonian Exile. Last week we read Jeremiah- he was a prophet in Jerusalem and lived right up to point of exile and a little while after. And Jeremiah stays in Jerusalem, although it probably would have been easier for him to go to Babylon he sticks around with the survivors. Ezekiel, on the other hand, is the next generation- he's a young man during the exile, and he heads off to Babylon in the first wave taken in 597.

Now, the Babylonian exile is what the popular historian Thomas Cahill calls one of the hinges of history. It's one of those events that literally changed the world. It's hard to even put into words how devastating the Babylonian exile was to Israel. Most of

us if we imagine another country invading our own, destroying our most precious institutions like the White House or American Idol and then carrying people away to leave the country an empty wasteland. This kind of national failure- this seems like the worst possible thing. Like it just can't get worse than this.

And I think to some degree this was true- the Exile was a failure of the state. And this was upsetting to Israel. But honestly, what was so devastating wasn't so much the failure of the state as what felt to the people like the failure of God.

See, the history, particularly of the Southern Kingdom was wrapped up in what Old Testament scholars call Royal Theology, or Davidic Theology. Before David the covenant that was most important was the Mosaic covenant in which God told the people I will be your God, IF you will be my people. Throughout the wilderness journey God's presence, God's glory, sometimes appeared to the people and sometimes seemed very absent indeed. The people built what's called a tabernacle, which was like a really fancy tent. And sometimes God's presence appeared to be inside, but often it did not. The people were on the move and God was, too- sometimes feeling present, sometimes not.

THEN, when the people made it into the land and established a kingdom, and David unified the tribes and built Jerusalem everything changed. People started talking about a new covenant that God made with David- something called a *berith olam*, or, everlasting covenant. God told David that he would establish him and his family on the royal throne forever. And even though God might decide to punish an individual ruler here or there and remove them- God would never take the blessing away from the Davidic line. And Solomon, David's son, then built a temple for God, and God's glory,

and it wasn't like before in the desert when God would come and go. In the temple, specifically in the Holy of Holies where the ark was, the people believed that's where God's presence now lived ALL the time.

And then, when the northern kingdom broke off and went into rebellion, this just proved the theology all the more. Because while the Southern Kingdom, Judah, stayed faithful to David's line and kept worshipping in the temple, the Northern kingdom suffered problem after problem until the Assyrians came in in 722 and just wiped the floor with them. And when the Assyrians tried to march South into Jerusalem, Judah stopped them. And so it's no wonder that this Royal theology, this David theology was such a big deal- the people felt like they had absolute proof that as long as they had the temple, and God's presence in the temple, and a Davidic king on the throne- then nothing could stop them.

And so, when just about a hundred years later prophets like Jeremiah told the people that God didn't care if they had a temple or not, that true religion was doing justice and loving kindness, well you can see why they scoffed at him. Justice and kindness? They had a temple. They had a Davidic king. They had God in their back pocket. And if ASSYRIA couldn't stop them- well nothing could stop them. They had forgotten all about Moses and God saying I'll be your God IF you be my people- to Israel God and country were like two crossed fingers.

And so, when Babylon did what Assyria couldn't do- when Babylon swept into Judah, and broke through Jerusalem's walls, sacked the palace, and burned the temple- the TEMPLE. It wasn't just a national failure. In the minds of the people it was as if God had failed them.

And so I don't think you can really blame Ezekiel if, after living through the greatest failure his people had ever known, feeling not just that they failed but that God had failed, you can't really blame him for going a little batty.

Failure is never easy. I think it's harder when, like Israel, you've known some success. This is kind of the story of Gary Hoover. Hoover is the entrepreneur-in-residence at the University of Texas (go horns). Hoover was one of those funny kids that kind of always knew what they wanted to do. When he was 12 for his birthday instead of a bike or something like that he asked for a subscription to Fortune Magazine, and instead of collecting baseball cards and memorizing stats, he memorized the companies on the Dow Jones Industrial average. Instead of amusement parks and things like that, his family would take him to Company Headquarters- he says by the time he was 18 he had visited the corporate headquarters of over 100 companies.

Still, interest alone isn't enough to be a successful entrepreneur. It wasn't until he was 30 that Hoover had his first big success. He started a company called Bookstop, which was the first kind of book superstore that integrated books and coffee and all. After 7 years he sold Bookstop to Barnes and Nobles for 41.5 million dollars. Not bad, right?

He had another couple of smaller successes, and bought an enormous home on Lake Austin. Life couldn't be better. And then he plunged into another venture called TravelFest, which was kind of a high end luxury travel agency. Do you remember travel agents? Well, if you do, you may remember that in 1998 the airlines decided we didn't need people to book our tickets for us, that we could probably be trusted to do that

ourselves. And so overnight travel agencies all over the world went the way of the horse and buggy manufacturers. Of course hindsight is 20-20. At the time Hoover didn't know the industry would change for good, and he believed in his company, and he had known such success. So he poured more and more into TravelFest, just knowing it was going to work. And as the numbers kept heading south, he kept pouring more in. When he called it quits in 1999 he was right on the edge of personal bankruptcy- his nice house a memory, his success a memory, his failure a stinging, bitter reality.

Now what makes Gary Hoover someone interesting to talk about is what he did in response to this. A normal person, me, for instance- I would probably look at all this and say, "You know, I had a good run, but it's time to just do something safer. It's time to just throw in the towel." And Hoover thought about doing that- for a few months he moped around and thought about just quitting. But then he received a letter from a friend he very much admired. And in the letter his friend shared with Gary his own failures, and he included a quote from Winston Churchill, a quote, Hoover says, that changed his life. The quote: "Success is going from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm." Success is going from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm. And as he read that he had an epiphany. Hoover realized that yes, his business had been a failure. But HE wasn't a failure. His business had failed, but that's all. And so he picked himself up and tried again- and if any of you have heard of Hoovers, it's an incredibly expensive publication and web service providing information on businesses. When he sold Hoovers he made more than double what he made on Bookstop. Success isn't a string of one triumph after another for most of us- it's going from failure to failure, and facing up to them, but not losing our enthusiasm.

This is how best to understand Ezekiel's vision. This vision he had, we get all freaked out about all the weird details and what not. On the web you'll find all this nonsense about UFO's and what not. It is an unusual vision, but there's no secret about what it's about. He tells us. He tells us. At the very end he tells us what this thing is- it's the glory of God; the presence of God. And it's coming for a visit- all the way in Babylon.

The point is that their theology failed, Ezekiel was saying, yes. Their theology had failed, their nation had failed- but God was still God. God had not failed. God was alive and well, and as long as that was true- then there was hope for them as well. The point of the vision? God isn't confined to some temple somewhere! God is God! And whether the people are in Jerusalem or Babylon or New York City- God's presence will find them.

And you know, I think the people actually listened to Ezekiel. I do. I think he was one of the few prophets appreciated in his own day. Because the people didn't give up. They said, we don't have a temple? Fine. And they focused on the scriptures instead. It is in Babylon that most of the Old Testament comes into it's final form. The scriptures became the resting place for God's presence. And we don't have a temple? Fine, we can still gather together and worship, right? It is in Babylon that the rudiments of synagogue worship is formed- the worship that is still practiced in Jewish communities today and the worship that formed the basis of Christian worship. What we are doing right here, right now- this started in the Babylonian exile! And all because the people realized, with Ezekiel's help- that their ideas about God and Israel had failed, but God was still very much alive and well.

Michael Jordan, one of the most famous athletes in the world said this: “I have missed over 9,000 shots. I have lost over 300 games. 26 times they have given the ball to me in the last seconds, and I have put it up, and I have missed. I have failed, and I have failed, and I have failed. And THAT is why I succeed.”

Success in real life isn't like it is in the movies. Success for us isn't just one triumph after another- it's going from failure to failure and not losing our enthusiasm.

When I was in high school in the summers I always went to Texas Tech band camp for two weeks. The last year I went I made the first symphony and was conducted by Dr. James Sudduth, who directed the entire college program. Sudduth was barbaric, intense, cruel, and brilliant. On our last rehearsal before the big, final concert, he said to us before the final piece: “However you play this is how we will play tonight. DON'T screw it up.”

We were playing Shostakovich's 40, and I was playing cymbals. I had one major crash, and that was it. Now, the thing about cymbals is they're harder than you think. You have to hit them at just the right angle. Too flat, and they schump together forming a kind of vacuum seal. Too much angle and it just sounds like pots and pans. And when you only have one crash- well you have to hit it just right the first time. There's no fixing it.

So, there I was. I was so intently focused on getting just the right angle, that I realized a few measures in that I had no idea where we were. I tried asking my friends. No dice. They were just as focused. And I didn't know what else to do, so I just went Luke Skywalker. I just closed my eyes and used the force. I had played this piece all

week, I knew where my moment was. And then, I could feel the music building, and I was getting ready. And it looked for all the world like Sudduth had cued me- and I offered up the most spectacular crash of my entire life. It was a crash worthy of the New York Philharmonic! It was fabulous! But Sudduth nearly fell off his podium. He stopped the music and pointed at me with the baton. His face was crimson. “What was THAT!?” he roared at me. I sputtered. “I thought, I thought that was where it was?” I offered up. “Well you thought wrong! That was an utter failure!” he spat back. And then I thought to myself that this was it, he was going to kill me. And I was going to die. I was going to die in Lubbock, Texas...not exactly how I thought I was going to go. And then, to my surprise, he started to laugh. He started to laugh, and said, “But, it was a MAGNIFICENT failure! And he looked at everyone and said, if you’re going to fail tonight- do it like he did. Fail...magnificently.” **Amen.**