

They Will Dwell Secure

Ezekiel and John the Baptizer are two of the most colorful characters in the Bible. Ezekiel was a dramatic



**Michael K.
Olmsted**

visionary who never minced his words about God's judgment and Israel's sins, experienced bizarre visions and declared God's unbroken love for his people. John the Baptizer was also a mysterious and colorful person who appeared out of the Dead Sea wilderness, condemning the Jews' devotion to rules and rituals in the place of submission to the God who loved them, and powerfully calling them to the Messiah who could bring them back to God.

Our first text falls in the section of Ezekiel called the "book of consolation" (chapters 25-48). The prophet returns to the familiar image of God as the shepherd to his people, sharing that in spite of every danger and the seeming hopelessness of life, there is always hope in God. Ezekiel excoriates Judah's leaders for their corruption and selfish appetites as they oppressed and robbed even the poorest people, while living solely for their own advantages. They are like shepherds who, instead of tending God's flock, scatter and abuse God's people. The result is the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the deportation of God's people to a foreign land of oppression.

Equally powerful is Ezekiel's language of hope (vv. 11-16). The Lord God is THE SHEPHERD who will search diligently for his flock, no matter how scattered, and rescue them from the darkness of this world. God will bring them home, then feed and provide for them in their fertile land. They will be safe once again in God's fold and feed in green pastures. God "will seek out the lost, bring back the strays, bind up the wounded, and strengthen the weak. But the fat and the strong I will destroy, because I will tend my sheep with justice" (v. 16). We view Ezekiel's visions of wheels in the air and the valley of dry bones as peculiar, but to the demoralized people of Judah these words of promise sound just as

strange. God never ceases to be God and his grace knows no equal enemy!

We move from 597 BC to the first century AD to discover ... nothing has changed. Sin is as ugly as ever, even among those who claim to be God's people. Another colorful prophet appears. God's promises and purpose remain true. John the Baptizer appears, shouting: "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon?" (Luke 3:7) To whom is John speaking? It is a mixed crowd who count themselves as God's chosen people who superficially observe the rules and rituals of Judaism without surrendering heart or life to the God who deeply loves them. This bold prophet from the wild does not look like, dress like or preach like the religious establishment. It is, as some thought, that Ezekiel or some other prophet had been thrust out of the realm of the dead to pronounce one final warning. The message is frightening: who warned you of God's approaching judgment? Can you offer any visible evidence of your faith, or are you repeating the same old empty words? Abraham is supposed to be your father? You are like a barren fruit tree, good for nothing except firewood! Give me some evidence you are serious about God!

Now, go back to the last word in the English translation of our Ezekiel text: JUSTICE. The crowd listening to John the Baptizer asks the key question: "What should we do (to show we really want to be God's people)?" (v. 10). John's answer is that what's in your heart must become visible in your living. Give to those in need. Feed the hungry. If you are a tax collector, do your job honestly and do not oppress people with your greed or power. You who are soldiers, help protect people instead of abusing them. Isn't it curious that the sins of that first century have so smoothly translated into our day? Faith in God cannot be reduced to rules and games of power. Faith in God changes the heart, resulting in changes in attitude and actions.

Ezekiel and John are powerful reminders of what God is all about when his Son comes into the world as

Formations

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the child in that Bethlehem manger. Every generation needs to rediscover the miracle of Christmas, the meaning of Advent. Pay attention to the news and look at the world around you. Religion and faith in God are not synonymous. Faith in God, what we call "salvation" or being "born again," is a relationship that changes both heart and mind.

The Christmas narrative is not just a sentimental little story of sweetness and lovely thoughts. For generations God revealed himself through events, people and written words. At last, in God's gracious timing, God decided it was time to immerse himself in our world so there could be no doubt about his love. The baby became a man, like Ezekiel and John the Baptizer, but also so much more. Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary, was also Christ, the only begotten Son of God, the Savior who can change us from within when we accept him by faith. Jesus is our good news, our reason to celebrate Christmas and every day.

We are hearing the word "Christian" attached to many ideas and people these days that have no connection to the Bible or Jesus. Voices are raised about national identity, financial security, military power and truth ... none of them connected to the Bible. The world has not changed. But Ezekiel reminds us that if we love God and serve him, God will be the shepherd who stays with us through all things. John reminds us that when we love God our lives will be blessed and the grace of God will change others. The world offers no real security. When life is crumbling around us, when the voices of hate and injustice seem to dominate, when hope is hard to find, look back once again at that helpless little baby in a Bethlehem manger and remember – he is the answer, the promise, the power that is our security now and forever. Ezekiel, John and all the prophets point to Jesus Christ.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.