

“The MacGuffin to End All MacGuffins”

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Scriptures: [Ezekiel 39:21–29](#); [Psalm 47](#); [1 Peter 4:12–19](#); [John 17:1–11](#)

I want to start the morning with a little bit of film studies. Sometimes in a film, or in any kind of story, you need something to drive the plot along and give the characters the opportunity to have the sort of interactions you want them to have. So King Arthur goes after the Holy Grail, or Odysseus seeks his homeland. In the early days of film, this sort of plot device came to be known as a “MacGuffin,”¹ a term popularized by Alfred Hitchcock. And in those early days, the MacGuffin was characterized by its irrelevance to the audience; it was something that was devoid of meaning. The MacGuffin could be anything; the reason the people are in the seats to see the movie is for something else. Hitchcock once quipped, “The MacGuffin is the thing that the spies are after, but the audience doesn't care.”

But then in the 70s, a young filmmaker named George Lucas had a different idea. He thought the audience should care about the MacGuffin, and in this I think he was tapping into those older, more legendary stories of ancient history. And so the audience cares very much about those Death Star plans hidden inside R2-D2. They are the only way our heroes can escape death at the Empire's hands! Some MacGuffins in Lucas' films even have divine power. Indiana Jones is out there punching Nazis and getting dragged behind trucks because he's chasing after the

¹ I'm getting my info about MacGuffin's from the Wikipedia article on the topic. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MacGuffin>

Ark of the Covenant. In my opinion, the story is just so much better when the MacGuffin means something.

Now imagine you were writing the script for a film about the people of Israel who had been taken into Exile in Babylon. It would be a heavy story to write. A people, taken from their land, taken from their Temple, which is left behind destroyed, forced into a strange culture to feed the Babylonian machine that doesn't take too kindly to those who would question its ways (Just ask Daniel fresh out of the Lion's Den, or his three friends fresh out of the fiery furnace). Those living under the rule of Babylon had survived the great "catastrophe"² of God's people. It is the crescendo of destruction brought about by their disobedience and turning away from their covenant with God. But what keeps them going? What motivates those prophetic voices who choose faithfulness even in the midst of Exile. If we were writing the adapted screenplay, what is their MacGuffin? What drives the story of the people of God forward? It's not a meaningless trinket, it is a promise: the promise of God to his people that he would rescue them from the hands of their oppressors, just as he had done in Egypt so long before. That is what keeps the people going through the years of Exile. God's judgement may last for a time, but as the Psalm says, his mercy endures forever.

We get that promise in our Old Testament Reading today from Ezekiel 39. Let's listen again from verse 25:

² I am not the first to use the term "catastrophe" to describe the Exile, hence the quotes. For example, see this article on the Exile:
<https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-the-exile/?srsltid=AfmBOooj0pcMmP-pzIJKPijZOsKthZVs3UdyqIBGglLU2wfOmcFjvImi>

“Therefore thus says the Lord God: Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob and have mercy on the whole house of Israel, and I will be jealous for my holy name. They shall forget their shame and all the treachery they have practiced against me, when they dwell securely in their land with none to make them afraid, when I have brought them back from the peoples and gathered them from their enemies' lands, and through them have vindicated my holiness in the sight of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the Lord their God, because I sent them into exile among the nations and then assembled them into their own land. I will leave none of them remaining among the nations anymore. And I will not hide my face anymore from them, when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, declares the Lord God.”

Three things I want to draw out of this promise as we understand not only this specific promise to the Exiled Israelites, but God's promises more generally to all of us who are called by his name. First, the goodness of God's promises outweighs the hardship and pain that we endure in waiting for those promises, even when that hardship and pain are of our own making. Put another way, New Creation Life is stronger than Death. The people had brought about the Exile upon themselves, by turning to idols and to earthly powers instead of to God, and the fruit of that disobedience was severe. There were also innocent, faithful people who had been caught in the crossfire. But what does God say of all his people, the innocent and the guilty? “They shall forget their shame and all the treachery they have practiced against me, when they dwell securely in their land with none to make them afraid.” Friends, this world is a mess. And if we are honest with ourselves there are many times the world is a mess because we are making it a mess. But the God who

brought his people up out of the most powerful empire in the world can do that and more for those who would believe in his promises.

Second, this promise from Ezekiel lets us know that God doesn't just redeem his people out of Exile because of his love and care for them, although of course that is at the heart of why he does. But also, God redeems us as a witness to the world that he is the God who redeems. God says that this act of redemption has "vindicated my holiness in the sight of many nations." God ought to be known to those who do not follow him not only for his judgement of wrong, but for his great mercy.

When we think of sharing our faith, or defending our faith, there is a tendency sometimes to make it seem like we have it all together and have had it all together for a long time. But what if, in sharing our weaknesses, our struggles, we show to a weak and struggling world just how merciful its Creator is?

Turning to the final verses of this promise, we should not mistake who is at work in this redemption. If Ezekiel had been one of those entrepreneurial prophets who always seem to be called to lead the charge on whatever it is God is doing, he might have added to this promise, "By the way God told me that I was to lead his people out of Exile. I am the new Moses! We meet on Tuesday nights at my place to get the ball rolling!" Thankfully, Ezekiel had no such allusions and simply reported what he had heard from God, which was this: "And I will not hide my face anymore from them, when I pour out *my* Spirit upon the house of Israel, declares the Lord God." Rescue comes when God pours out *his* spirit on his people. No other change agent will do.

Here on this day that sits between the feast of the Ascension and the Day of Pentecost, it is worth asking ourselves: are we willing to wait on the Spirit? Saying that the work is the Lord's is one thing, waiting on the timing of the Spirit is another. If we are not careful we baptize our ambition and zeal for goodness into a life that claims to be about the kingdom when it is really just all about me.

I think I have shared with you before the refreshing surprise I had coming on staff here at Apostles when I discovered the intentional practice of prayer, worship, and silence as part of our disciplines as a church staff. It is not that previous ministry contexts where I worked did not value those things, because of course they did and they were present. But ministry and any good kingdom work can get so bogged down in the day to day realities of living and working in the world that we forget the simple truth that it is not us who does the work, but the Holy Spirit. Often times the question we have to face is whether we are willing to wait on the Lord.

The promise delivered to Ezekiel gets a image to seal the deal, an image that would seemingly come to fruition in the next few decades after Ezekiel is writing. You see it in the descriptions that follow in the remaining eight chapters of the book. There will be a new Holy City, with gates and walls and living quarters, and at its center, a new Temple. And God's presence will fill this Temple and streams of living water will flow out of it. This is the guarantee that God will follow through on his promises to his people, the tangible sign.

And indeed, the Temple was rebuilt and the city of Jerusalem did become bustling again. But this was not the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise. His people remained in darkness - darkness of their own making and darkness forced upon them. But in the right time, God became a baby. The glory of the Lord entered his temple when Jesus came into that holy space, carried by Mary and Joseph at his dedication and then again when he was twelve, then again when God the Son came to his Temple in his ministry to teach his Law as it ought to be taught. That living water flowing from the Temple was first offered to a Samaritan woman at a well about 45 miles away from the Temple. Because God's promises aren't guaranteed by any place, but by God himself.

We celebrated the ultimate fulfillment of Ezekiel's promise this past Thursday, in the Feast of Ascension. That the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ is reigning the cosmos at the right hand of the Father means that God's holiness is truly vindicated in the sight of the nations. Through his chosen people of Israel, God has sent his Son to die and rise again, showing the whole world the way of greatest love and opened to us all the way of salvation.

And yet, we're still here. Jesus himself saw fit to pray for us to endure when he is praying in the garden before he is handed over to die. We face the same dilemma as Ezekiel's audience. If you read on into that great description of the new Temple and the restored Jerusalem following our reading, you will see from the first verse that this promise comes 25 years into a 70 year Exile. Ezekiel is describing a future he would not witness in this life, nor would many who would hear his words. We have

the message of the Ascended Lord, the promise fulfilled. And yet we struggle with sin, we struggle with loss and pain. We are people chasing a promise.

This is why we need Pentecost. This is why God signs the promissory note of his promises to us made in our baptism with his Holy Spirit. Our Lord has ascended and we ask, "Now what?" God answers that question by sending the Holy Spirit.

When we think about the work of the Holy Spirit, our minds will often jump to the gifts for ministry that the Holy Spirit gives, and we ought to rightly think about those things, not lionizing one particular set of gifts over another. But we should also be thinking about the gifts of the Holy Spirit in much more basic ways, that it is through the Spirit that our faith has a life at all.

I saw an interview clip with Aretha Franklin where she was asked what were her biggest challenges. It's a pretty good question. And the Queen of Soul had a pretty good and pretty honest answer. Putting it in only the way she could, she answers, "The biggest challenges for me. Just trying to figure out what to cook for dinner. Nightly, you know, just night after night."³ Sometimes, it is the daily things that are the biggest and hardest things.

As our church calendar turns towards the Day of Pentecost, if you want to see more of the Spirit's work in your life, start thanking God for the small, daily ways in which the Spirit empowers you to live the life of faith. Give thanks that the Holy Spirit helps you remember to pray. Give thanks that the Holy Spirit helps you hold your tongue

³ https://youtube.com/shorts/MfpMXFAaCxA?si=Xllu4_ycUEMP11n8

from a spiteful word. Give thanks that the Holy Spirit is present with you in your suffering. Give thanks that the Spirit is giving you the fruit of gratitude.

When Jesus prays for us in the Garden, he doesn't pray that we do miracles in his name or that we would have these dramatic and fantastical experiences of God, even though he says we will do greater things than he did. He keeps it fairly simple. "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one." Keep them in your name. Make them one. That's the work of the Spirit. If you want to pray for the work of the Holy Spirit in your life, asking for the things which Jesus asks for you is not a bad place to start. The one who is seated at the right hand of the Father knows what he's talking about when it comes to what his followers need. He knows that the world would very much like to call us by its own names, those of political tribes, financial status, or whatever label we want to create for ourselves. He knows that in a world of increasing fracture, his people ought to be known by their unity. This work can only come through the power of his Holy Spirit.

What is animating you today? What are you driving towards? Is it a desire for the daily work of the Spirit in your life so you can partner with God in the work he is doing in the world? Because that is what he has for you. May he complete that work in us all. Amen.