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**A Cycle of Thanks**  
(Ezekiel 34:11-16; 20-24)

**The Passive Prophet**

When I was in seminary my class schedule was pretty much determined by my work schedule, which means it was hard for me to get a lot of the classes I wanted. So I took lots of phy. ed, wood shop, and pottery.... Well, it wasn't that bad, but one semester it looked like it was going to get awfully close.

One of the requirements was that we had to take a class on one of the prophets. Awesome. The prophets are amazing, which one would it be?

-Isaiah, who called for justice and believed there would come a time when the wolf would live with the lamb...?

-Daniel, who was a voice of faith and individuality in Babylon and seer of apocalyptic visions...?

-Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, transparent, passionate...who spoke words of anger mixed with words of consolation...?

I should be so lucky. I ended up with Ezekiel, my last choice. Described by some as "the passive prophet," Ezekiel laid on his side for 390 days to make a point. Not to cheapen the experience, but I felt like I had the opportunity to spend a semester with one of the Beatles, and I got Ringo.

Worse, for one of our first assignments, we were told to find a verse that "said something about our lives," that described our spiritual journeys. The problem is, the book of Ezekiel begins with a vision of flying half-human, half-animal creatures with wheels. Hey Ringo, meet me halfway: give me something to work with.

But I believe the Bible is a very intentional piece of work. You know, if you stick with it long enough you will learn something from each of its books and maybe even find something interesting. Well, maybe not in Leviticus so much, too many details. Or Numbers, that's a tough one. Leviticus and Numbers...and Deuteronomy. That one's a

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little dry. So Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, but all the others... gold.

And that includes Ezekiel. After the first sixteen chapters, during which Ezekiel builds a model of Jerusalem with a clay tablet and a pan, eats a scroll, shaves his head, burning a third of the hair, the book reveals its gold.

A little background: Ezekiel was amongst the second wave of people taken into Babylon when Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem about 600 years prior to Jesus' birth. His fellow countrymen actually thought they would be able to return to their homes soon, that the end to their oppression was near, but Ezekiel's message was a grim one: all that you had is being taken apart. There will be no return to Jerusalem, no return to the life you knew until you first return to God.

In the years leading up to the captivity, the country had relied on foolish political alliances that God had warned them against and the people themselves had turned to idolatry. A holy land, a holy people had become defiled.

### **Birth and Rebirth**

But here's where the prophet becomes a poet: through Ezekiel God speaks to the people in a beautiful metaphor that both condemns and reassures. God says "when you were born, you were abandoned right out of the womb. I found you still covered with the blood of childbirth, I found you in your blood and I said 'live!' I washed you, covered you, nourished you, and gave you the finest things, I made a covenant with you, only to have you turn away in vanity and squander the life I gave you.

However, God said, though you have forgotten the covenant, I have not. I will re-establish it with you.

This was the verse I chose to represent my spiritual journey. It resonated with my experience of being a Christian. Specifically, I was raised in a faith tradition but never really put it to any use. Ultimately it became just a tradition in my life, a part of my past and little more. Religion easily becomes an artifact when it is not backed by some sort of connection to God, however that may be defined in your life. So it was for me. I turned away.

It was a time, to paraphrase Dante, "when in the middle our journey I found myself in the middle of the dark wood, where the straight way was lost." Does the "our" refer to God

and me? Does the “I” indicate a path I had followed?

Then came a time when I distinctively sensed God reaching out to me. I had come to the end of the resources I had for understanding life and welcomed this intrusion that seemed to give me language to express the fears I had as well as find some comfort and meaning.

God, had, I told the class, found me in my blood and said “live!” reaffirming that though I had walked away from the covenant, God nevertheless still honored it. It was literally a time of rebirth. It seemed so established.

### **Cycles of Forgetting, Cycles of Grace**

But as the Israelites learned, it is what happens after the hearing the words “live” that shapes the life experience. The story I told my seminary class seems laughably simple compared to the extent to which I’ve have to call out to God since then, the degree to which I rely on God to nurture, feed, and raise me.

One year ago that we moved into our home. So last week I was unpacking. In one of the boxes I came across a bunch of journals. I’ve always been big on journaling. If it happened write it down so you can relive it later. I’m rethinking that advice.

Looking through the pages of the journal revealed a disturbing perspective: though the scale is smaller, the turning away, the forgetting remains. It is just more subtle. It manifests itself in the details of daily life: wrong motives, selfishness, despair, love withheld, injustice ignored. Now there is not so much blood, but bruises. Where is the mindfulness of God that someone who has experienced God’s grace should have as part of the warp and woof of their being?

Opening that journal was like opening a medical encyclopedia to the section where they have the color pictures that you wish you didn’t see. How often have I looked at the history of Israel with a jaundiced eye, not seeing that while some of it is indeed history, it is also a metaphor for the lives we live corporately and individually? The problem with the Israelites as a community began with a problem with the Israelites as individuals.

The good news is in that covenant, that God who will not leave us alone. Who finds us and tells us “live” over and over again. Who follows our cycles of forgetting with cycles of grace, a grace that is manifest in a sense of hope that remains even when there are

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moments when I feel I've once again left the path on my journey with God. As I did so many years ago I sense the voice of God calling to me.

### **Cycle of Thanks**

We struggle with the fact of an invisible God, yet we are sensitive toward attempts to use metaphors to understand God. God as parent, God as friend, God as lover, all seem imperfect.

In today's reading God is a shepherd who says I will search for my sheep and seek them out. I will seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak. It's imperfect. All approximations are imperfect.

What matters is not so much the image as the truth behind it: God knows us and says "live!" again and again. May God see our cycle of thanks in the steps we take, the words we speak, and in our actions toward others, not just this Thanksgiving week, but always.