

“God’s Great Big Upside-Down World”

Ezekiel 17:22-24

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Everywhere has its own version. Up in North Carolina, it’s in Raleigh. In South Carolina, I hear it’s down in Columbia. Growing up in Georgia, it was off in the lesser-known town of Hampton. No matter the locale, you can bet that certain elements will always be the same. The turkey legs and funnel cakes; the livestock exhibitions and prize pumpkins as big as your kid cousin; the carousel and whirling rides that make you sick to your stomach. No matter where you grew up, I imagine many of you have your own memories of the state fair, a cross country tradition where fun and fried food somehow go hand-in-hand.

As a child, one of the stops I loved to make at the fair was the fun house. There, the world as I knew it was momentarily distorted by sleights of hand and tricks of the eye. You may recall that on the way into the fun house, there was a wall full of mirrors. One stretched my fifth grade frame to at least six foot four. Another shrunk me to the size of a small dog. Still another blurred the background all around me so that it looked like I was floating on air.

I remember being just as enamored by those mirrors as I was eager to avoid them. Having come to expect the same old thing every time I caught a peek of my reflection, I enjoyed switching things up and seeing from a different perspective. I was amused by the absurdity of it all, but it was also dizzying, disorienting, and a little disturbing. In the funhouse mirror, I didn’t recognize myself, at least not as I’d appeared above the bathroom sink earlier that morning. My reflection flipped around, the ground beneath my feet would begin to feel shaky. If only for a few moments, my world was turned upside down.

This morning’s text describes a different sort of topsy turvy reality, a world in which down has become up and up has become down. As I mentioned a moment ago, the prophet, Ezekiel, is addressing a people whose world has been inverted by war and deportation from their homeland. The Israelites had been plucked from a familiar landscape and planted in the land of Babylon--a land as distant as Greenville is from Omaha, and with at least as many cultural differences. There, they were to live on the margins, biding their time until some far-off day when they might be restored to their native land. They have become second-class citizens, underdogs without any means of ascending society’s ranks. As you might imagine, God’s people were running high on uncertainty and low on hope, wondering if their world would ever resemble the days of old.

Writing from Babylon, where he waited with the people in exile, Ezekiel directly addresses those scattered alongside him. At first, he issues words of judgment, but perhaps recognizing the people’s sheer despondence, he interrupts his train of thought to offer these words of hope on behalf of the Lord:

“I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.”

In other words, after all the people’s pain and trauma, God is about to flip the script. God is going to restore a people ground down by exile to a place where they are yet again enabled to thrive. As Ezekiel tells it, God is going to “bring low the high tree [and] high the low tree; [to] dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.”

At the end of all his judgments, Ezekiel shares this testimony of hope, which is rooted in God’s promises. Though the people cannot save themselves, God can, and God will. After a generation under the heavy hand of oppression, the people’s story will not end in Babylon, but future generations will be restored to the place their people once called home. God has heard the people’s cries and is about to turn the world upside down.

This passage, in which God is the Great Reverser, the one who lifts up the lowly and puts the powerful to shame, isn’t just about this particular people’s story. Instead, it points beyond itself to the overarching character of the kingdom of God. That counter-cultural kingdom is at the heart of Jesus’ message and ministry, which he begins by proclaiming, “the kingdom of God has come near.” From that point onward, Jesus paints a picture of a strange and unexpected realm in which mustard seeds become sheltering shrubs, prodigal sons are welcomed with wide-open arms, and stranger Samaritans become the heroes of the day. *This* is the kingdom of God: a world of upended expectations and expanded imaginations, a world turned upside down.

There’s no question that the radical reversal at the heart of God’s kingdom is good news for those on the bottom. After all, Jesus begins his first full-fledged sermon:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

These are, indeed, words of promise for the exiled Israelites, but what about their oppressors in Babylon? If we were to follow God’s upside down logic, that foolish wisdom of the cross, what would it mean for those on top, the people who have enjoyed plenty of power and privilege?

Let me be clear that I don’t have the definitive answer to this question but believe it’s one worth wrestling with, as Jesus in the same sermonic breath declares:

“Woe to you who are rich,

for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now,

for you will be hungry.

These are challenging verses that call us to earnestly consider our position in relation to our neighbors and our God, to wonder what it would look like to participate in the upending work of the kingdom. As we consider that question, scripture makes it clear that whether rich or poor, hungry or full, God’s kingdom is not a zero-sum game, despite society’s suggestions to the contrary. It’s not us versus them, but our wellness--individually and together--depends on that of the other. While a culture of competition would have us believe that a win for one person must constitute a loss for someone else, the same simply isn’t so in the kingdom of God.

In her book, *The Sum of Us*, Heather McGhee recalls one way this zero-sum narrative has played out in American history.¹ In the early 20th century, grand public pools were sumptuous emblems of common leisure steadfastly supported by white Americans until (that is) they were told to integrate them. For her research, McGhee visited the site of one such pool in Montgomery, Ala., drained and cemented over since 1959 so that nobody, white or Black, could ever enjoy it again. It’s a self-defeating form of exclusion, a determination not to share resources even if the ultimate result is that everyone suffers.

McGhee goes on to propose that instead of a zero-sum mindset, we work toward win-win, a world in which we see each group’s successes as good for the whole. “We all live under the same sky,” McGhee writes, and in so saying, she echoes the words of Ezekiel, who offers an expansive image of Israel’s future. As promised, God will raise Israel from lowly twig to mountaintop cedar “in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit...[and under that tree] every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.”

When God turns the world upside-down, God isn’t just tossing out the topmost tree to make room for the little twig. Instead, God is acting out of abundance, making room for all of creation to flourish together. That is good news for us. As a people who live complex lives in between the world’s opportunity and violence, its good and evil, its beauty and brokenness, we can say with confidence that the God of tenderness plants the cedar sprig for us--for all of us--so that one day we all will find shade under its branches. When God turns the world upside down, it is not only good news for those on the bottom. It is good news for us all.

¹ Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. New York: Random House, 2021.

A number of years ago, I participated in an internship program centered around urban poverty and service in the city I most recently called home, Charlotte, North Carolina. Throughout the summer, I was assigned to work at Moore Place, an apartment community for adults with a history of chronic homelessness. The Moore Place philosophy was simple (if not a little upside-down): give folks a supportive home *first*, and their flourishing will follow. Residents arrived at Moore Place--some of them, after decades on the streets--seeking safety, dignity, and the kind of stability that leads to sustainable success.

In an effort to expand our horizons by a few more inches, one requirement of the internship was that we were to exclusively use public transportation for one week. Now, I don't know if you've traveled by Charlotte Area Transit Authority recently, but it is hardly the New York City subway. Between multiple buses and long blocks of walking, a trip that should take ten minutes can easily quadruple in time. For that reason, among others, I had rarely ridden public transit around town. Apart from a ride on the lightrail to a concert or occasional sporting event, I tended to avoid public transit--because it was easier that way and because I had other options. It wasn't my native system, and I'll admit I was nervous about navigating it.

Despite all this, I parked my car, mapped my course, and rolled back my alarm clock with far-fetched hopes that I might still arrive at Moore Place on time. At first, things went smoothly. I enjoyed a little extra fresh air on the morning walk to my bus stop and managed to arrive at Moore Place as planned. But, the afternoon caught up with me, and after slipping away just a few minutes later than intended, I arrived back at the stop just in time to see my bus driving into the distance.

I was beginning to assess my options when one of Moore Place's residents, Michael, approached from down the block. I had seen Michael around but not shared much conversation with him, so I was surprised that he was walking my way.

"Well, there it goes," he shrugged, his eyes following my intended ride down the street. Seeing the question written across my face, Michael turned toward the schedule, which was posted at the stop, and helped me find the next best option. I thanked him, expecting him to turn back toward his friends, who were posted nearby, but he just sighed and sat down on the bus stop's beat-up bench. Though he didn't say as much, it seemed Michael was prepared to wait with me. And, he did. For the next half hour, we sweated under the hot summer sun, swapped a few stories, and finally sat in silence, waiting together until the next bus finally rolled around.

As the doors hissed open, I climbed the steps and inserted my fare. Turning around to thank Michael for helping me pass the time, I caught him waving at the bus driver, a protective look on his face. In an almost parental tone, he said "take care of this one," the implied subtext being, "She's gonna need it." With that, the accordion doors closed, and I was on my way.

My exchange with Michael offered just a small glimpse of God's kingdom in the grand scheme of things, but I share it because our encounter represented a rare opportunity to flip the script. As accustomed as I was--and still am--to having the upper hand, I was out of my element that afternoon. Rather than navigating a system built with me in mind, as I most often do, I was

the novice; I was at a disadvantage and in need of assistance, which Michael recognized and graciously gave. And, I found it was freeing to surrender some of my usual control and let someone else--someone I might not have expected--take the lead. I would have liked to believe that summer was about me helping others, about delivering aid and expertise from the top down. But, the upside-down truth of it was that I received care beyond my imagination. With the tables turned, I received an extra helping of God's grace.

This past year especially, our lives have been upended by illness, uncertainty, and all kinds of loss. We have seen the world turned on its head and--to be sure--are eager for some things to flip back around, as is gradually taking place. Still, I am left wondering about those who already lived on society's underside, the modern-day exiles whom the pandemic has rendered particularly vulnerable: people without work or those facing eviction, parents without food to put on the table or children navigating a year of learning loss. I wonder what it would look like for their tables to turn. And, I wonder how we--as individuals and the church--might embrace the upside-down dreams God has for all of us in this season and beyond. I imagine it might be a little like taking a long, hard look in the funhouse mirror--dizzying at first, but also refreshing, invigorating, life-giving. I look forward to taking it all in alongside you. And, I trust that as often as we participate in God's upside-down work, it will not only be good news for those on the bottom. It will be good news for us all.