

They Shall Know That There Has Been a Prophet Among Them

Outdoor Worship—Sunday, July 4, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
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Ezekiel 2:1-9

He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord God." Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

And you, O mortal, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns surround you and you live among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words, and do not be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house. But you, mortal, hear what I say to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you. I looked, and a hand was stretched out to me, and a written scroll was in it.

In our drifting contemporary world who is there who speaks for God and for the Church? Throughout most of my life the world looked to great Christian leaders for a word of hope. Three readily come to mind. Pope John Paul was a highly respected pope whose influence went far beyond the Roman Church. Mother Theresa was renowned for her work among the poor and dying in India and was commonly held up as a model of godliness. And then there was Billy Graham the American evangelist who gained respect as America's Christian voice. All of these people are now gone, and it appears that none have risen to take their places. Let me not overstate my concern, for the Christian Church was never to have one grand prophet, and even these great leaders which I have mentioned were not infallible, yet there does appear to be a real shortage of prophets to address the wider world! Our Old Testament lesson speaks to that need as we find in the call of Ezekiel a call to all of us, for all believers are prophets to one degree or another as we speak God's truth to a lost

world. Having instructed Ezekiel on the prophetic work which he was to be doing, God warned him in advance that most would not listen to him or obey, but he was clear that *they shall know that there has been a prophet among them*. Let us consider God's instruction to Ezekiel, so that people may say of us, there is a prophet among us!

God's call to Ezekiel begins with the command to *stand up on your feet, and I will speak to you*, and this order is rich in meaning. Though God tells him to boldly stand, His initial words to Ezekiel sound more like a call to humbly bow. God addresses Ezekiel as *O mortal*, or in older translations, *son of man*. This was a statement of great humility as it freely confessed that one is made of dust and is very frail. Surely Ezekiel felt extremely humbled as just before this calling he had witnessed a grand and frightening vision of God enthroned and worshipped by heavenly beings. Ezekiel had never felt so small and weak in all his life! He was a mere human being, with all the weaknesses and frailties involved.

And yet the call came for him to stand. Here is a challenge to be strong and bold. Here is the call to be tough. Our usual posture before God is that of kneeling or bowing, and this is good, as this is an appropriate way to honor a superior, but there is also a time to stand! While God would never want us to become a boastful and arrogant people, there are many times when we need to stand up with a spirit of boldness. A good soldier is one who humbly follows orders and gives full respect to his superiors, but when the call to battle is sounded the good soldier will stand strong and brave. In a similar way Ezekiel was being addressed. But what shall we do when our reserves of bravery are running low? How beautiful is God's challenge to Ezekiel! *And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me*. When we are weak God's Spirit raises us up! I suppose we have all had times when we did not know how we would find the energy to face life, but God's Spirit raised us up, just as it raised Ezekiel.

How we need to be a standing people! Can we make confidence a habit? Believers can too easily get into the habit of poor-mouthing the Church and their own resources and abilities, and this talking ourselves down is often done with a belief that this is an appropriate humility! We could use a lesson on confident faith. The world is attracted to confidence. That is why young people join the Marines. I knew a gentleman who was in the Sea-Bees during the Second World War and always appreciated the confidence which he learned from that experience. Two of their mottos come to mind: "Can do!" or better yet, "The difficult we do now. The impossible takes a little longer." Or perhaps we should learn from the world of athletics and the Nike company's slogan, "Just do it." God wants us to stand up with Ezekiel in a confident faith, and having done that, God wants to give us our marching orders.

Having stood before God, Ezekiel then received his instruction, and it was not a pleasant assignment. He was to face a tough crowd with a tough message. *He said to*

me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn. When God speaks so harshly of the nation of Israel, His “chosen people,” let us be reminded of what it means to be a chosen people. God did not select a nation which seemed to merit that status. God simply chose the nation of Israel out of love, just as God has chosen us to be His people. It is not because we have earned that affection, it is because God is amazingly loving, even when we may be obnoxious and rebellious.

We must also remember the precise time when Ezekiel was called. He was living among a settlement of Jews who had been taken away to Babylon during the several invasions of their country, although it was before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. These exiles were convinced that soon they would be returning to Israel and life would be as it always was. They also resisted the messages of the prophets which condemned them for their idol worship and lack of true devotion to God and told of coming judgment. These people were set in their ways and were not about to change, and to them, Ezekiel’s message sounded like nothing less than treason. I often hear people speak of our day as a time when political division seems so strong. This may not be a harmonious moment, but we are on much better terms with each other than Ezekiel was with the Nation of Israel!

The prophet faced a tough crowd and added to this difficulty was the tough message which he was called to deliver. *I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord God.”* The Jews of Ezekiel’s day refused to believe and were convinced that he was not genuinely authorized as God’s prophet. In our day we are facing a people who laugh at the very notion of divine revelation. More and more our people claim to be believers in science and little else, yet we have been called to speak for God. Add to all that our natural resistance to taking orders from anyone, even God.

The assignment for Ezekiel and for ourselves, is a very difficult one, yet God still calls and insists upon our obedience to that call. Moses and Jeremiah argued with God when they were called to be prophets, but in this encounter, God seems to be giving Ezekiel no opportunity to object. He is given a scroll and commanded to preach to the people. This receiving of a scroll is unique to Ezekiel, and it presents us with a picture of our call in our day. We have been given the wonderful Book, and all of it is true. In this way, as we faithfully communicate the content of our Bibles, we are all prophets.

Ezekiel’s circumstances seemed grim, yet God was all the more insistent upon his assignment. Twice in this brief passage God says, *Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house).* This is not a promising start for a ministry! Then again, God is preparing Ezekiel the only and best way which someone can be prepared—by hearing the truth. God prepares and braces him by first telling him not to be afraid, particularly of the *words* which will be spoken against him. God mentions *words* twice. Harsh words spoken against us hurt. As children we recite the familiar

little ditty “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” Unfortunately, this saying has always been incorrect. God tells the prophet that this hostile environment will be like living among briars and scorpions, but do not be afraid!

God also exhorts him not to be dismayed by their angry and scornful looks. The Hebrew word which we translate as *dismay* means most literally *shattered*! Ezekiel made it all look easy for in the years ahead he was a fearless messenger of God in the face of all kinds of rejection and scorn. But O how it must have hurt, and how lonely he must have felt among his people! As a young man I was blessed to hear the great British preacher, John Stott. Dr. Stott’s message touched upon Paul’s affirmation in Romans 1:16: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes*. He conjectured that Paul made this affirmation because he probably struggled with occasional feelings of shame. It is natural to feel shame when we are treated shamefully as Paul was. The key to Paul’s bold ministry was not that he was above feeling such painful and negative feelings. His ministry was strong because he overcame those feelings, real as they felt. Such is our calling as Christians, whether we be Ezekiel in exile, Paul in a prison cell, or you and me in our daily lives.

While there are grim and harsh elements of Ezekiel’s calling, the future was not so dark as one might think. Time was on Ezekiel’s side and in a matter of years his predictions would be proven true. He was commissioned as a prophet in the year 593 B.C., and until 585 B.C. when word of Jerusalem’s complete destruction reached the exiles, the Jews of Babylon were in complete denial of Ezekiel’s message of judgment, but that tragic report changed them. It was in that year that we find the prophet’s message changing. Up to that time he warned of coming punishment, and with the fulfillment of that prophecy he moved on to a message of coming restoration and hope. It is in this phase of his preaching that we hear such wonderful messages as the Valley of the Dry bones which we recently studied at Pentecost. As believers time is on our side, for the Good News is true and time always reveals truth.

America needs prophets to speak words of warning and hope, so let us listen to God’s call to this prophet. Let us boldly stand up, receive God’s call, and then go on to speak to this disobedient world. The world’s response may not be a desired one, but that may change with time. Let us stand as God’s people so that *“they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.”*