

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost July 4 2021

Ezekiel 2:1-5

Over the next few weeks, we're going to spend some time with the Prophets of Israel. As we do so, we should make clear what we mean when we talk about the Prophets of Israel.

What comes to your mind when I say prophet or prophecy? When I was growing up, I would imagine people who looked into crystal balls and saw the future, prophecies were cryptic messages about future events- think Nostradamus. While these are true in other traditions, prophets and prophecies are different in Judaism.

The Prophets of Israel are people who have had a radical encounter with God's presence. This divine inspiration has come to them and commissioned them to go and speak to the people of Israel. The language used in scripture was that "The Spirit of the Lord" speaks through the prophets or "the word of the Lord came to" them.

The prophets came from all walks of life. The well-educated and well off, down to those who were more on the fringes of society. The early prophets tended to be ones who spoke to individuals in power (kings and other court officials- think Nathan, King David's

court prophet) the later prophets tended to address the nation as a whole or an entire city (Ezekiel for example).

The goal of the prophets is to pass along a word from God to the hearers. The content of which was pretty similar. They would remind the people of the covenant between God and the people of Israel. They would often accuse Israel of breaking that covenant- through the worship of other gods, alliances with other nations, and social injustices like not caring for the widows, orphans, and aliens in their lands. This would be followed by a call them to repent- to turn back from these ways. To return to and renew the covenantal relationship with God. Finally, they would lay out the consequences for not repenting. This was often done in poetry and using language that was often symbolic and would also have a time horizon that extended beyond just that historical moment. It described not only how God would respond to the now but also how this action fit into the bigger activity of God in and through time.

Pre-exile to Babylon the prophets tended to warn, if you don't get your act together bad things will happen. Post-exile, the prophets tended to bring a message from God that says- yes, you are suffering the consequences of your actions now, but God is faithful (even though you haven't been) and God will restore you.

This week, we hear from the prophet Ezekiel. We don't know much about Ezekiel, but we do know that he was likely among the first group of people deported to Babylon when the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar conquered the city of Jerusalem (the first time) in 598 BCE. As the son of a priest, Ezekiel was among the group of important figures sent away as hostages to try and keep the nation under control. Internal evidence suggests Ezekiel was 30 years old and married and that he prophesied between 593-571 BCE.

According to the text, the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel by the river Chebar. He is called to accuse Israel of breaking the covenant with God and warn them of the consequences of failing to repent. The Israelites broke the covenant by worshipping other gods and refusing to care for those who were weakest in their society- the widows, orphans, and immigrants in their land.

God's gives this commission to Ezekiel with one promise- they aren't going to listen to your warnings, because their hearts are hardened. How's that for a recruiting pitch! Work really hard at this, but it will produce no results. So, success as a prophet for Ezekiel does not depend on the audience reaction. It is entirely dependent on his obedience to the Lord's commission to speak to Israel. Proclaim it, God seems to say. Leave the rest up to me.

The word Ezekiel brings is classic Lutheran Law and Gospel. The law says that they are to worship God alone. So, their worshipping of idols- other things that took their attention away from God, that supplanted God's kingdom with ones of their own design, will have negative consequences. They have broken the law and punishment will come.

That punishment is fully revealed with the news of the final sack of Jerusalem in 586 BCE- when the Temple (the visible sign of God's presence with the Jews and an integral part of their faith) was leveled and the streets ran ankle deep with the blood of the citizens of Jerusalem.

The destruction of the Temple in 586 is deeply jarring to the Jewish people. The Temple played a core role in their faith. Without it, was it even possible to fulfill their obligations to God? What about the covenant? Was it still in effect? Also, in that day and age when you went to war it wasn't just you and the Babylonians fighting, it was your gods! So, the question arose, is God still God or was God defeated by Marduk (the Babylonian god)? They were a people set adrift.

Ezekiel steps into this shock and speaks good news- a word of promise, of hope. He points out that it was not a lack of consideration on God's part but their own recklessness and

faithlessness that caused their destruction. In this way, their punishment is deserved. However, the promise is that God has not deserted them, but rather has gone into exile with them. God will restore them, even to the Promised Land. Hope lies in a new David who God will raise up from among them and who will give them new hearts so they will rebel no more. Think that's impossible? Ezekiel uses the illustration of the valley of dry bones to illustrate that God can raise even that which seems dead to new life.

As with all Law and Gospel preaching, he reminds the Israelites, you cannot do this on your own and if you try- you'll muck it up. However, with God, all things are possible, and God's love is steadfast and true- even when ours isn't.

Doing God's work, answering God's call to proclaim the Word to the world is not easy. It can be a frustrating and lonely task. We can feel like Ezekiel, proclaiming God's word to a people who won't listen. Even Jesus has a hard time with those in his hometown. And he holds out the very real possibility to the disciples he sends out that some will not accept their teaching (so shake the dust from your feet as you go).

So why do it? Why go and proclaim when there is no guarantee you will be successful? My sister-in-law put it well in speaking for

herself, because of her love for those who have not heard and believed. Because the word we offer is life. A life fuller and more abundant than a life following the rules of the world. Famed author and fellow believer C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important." I put it this way, Christianity is either a matter of life and death or a waste of time. The only thing it cannot be is "meh".

And if something is of infinite importance, life and death, and you love your fellow human beings- then you answer the call God has placed on you and you go into the world proclaiming that message, and trust that God will take care of the rest. And we can risk doing that because we trust that God will take care of us. That there is nothing this world can do to touch us.

It is a difficult thing, no doubt. I find myself still afraid. Still hesitating to do things I believe to be true because I need my job, I want people to like me, I'm scared of being hurt.

But like Ezekiel, and those disciples sent out two by two, I go in my imperfect way to proclaim the truth that I have lived and that has saved me. My fellow disciples, claimed and equipped by God through the waters of baptism, I pray, that you are inspired to do the same.