

SPG#208, Pentecost 5B, Proper 9

July 5, 2009

Ezekiel 2:1-5

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

In our study of the man, Jesus Christ, we often spend time reflecting on his teachings and his parables. But often, instead of doing that, or in addition to doing that, we focus on the man Jesus and his character, who he was as a man, what he was like. Good learning in the New Testament occurs when we have both an appreciation for who he is as portrayed in scripture and what he taught. In a similar way, in today's Old Testament lesson, we encounter one of the most colorful and pronounced figures in all of scripture, the prophet Ezekiel. Now Ezekiel as a prophet had many things to say, and they are recorded in the book of Ezekiel. But in this case, it was also the nature of him as a person that was so striking.

As you may recall, Ezekiel was the witness in the Valley of Dry Bones when God changed a pile of human skeletons into living and breathing people. Near the beginning of Ezekiel, we find God giving Ezekiel a scroll that he is supposed to eat. It was Ezekiel who saw the vision of a wheel within a wheel, and rims of the wheels had eyes all in it.

Ezekiel, as a man, served as a bridge between the history of Israel and that body of literature filled with dreams and visions, called apocalyptic literature.

So, we get a picture of a John the Baptizer type man: outlandish and outrageous. But in addition to being a very noticeable and prominent person, another characteristic of Ezekiel was that he was single minded to carry out his calling.

He was called of God to be a prophet. Within his dreams, visions, and ecstatic experiences were messages and prophecies that were important for the people of Israel.

And as far as Ezekiel was concerned he was called into life to deliver those messages.

So, who he was and what he did were all focused on being a prophet.

And the people in those times were in need of a new word from God. During the time of Ezekiel, they were in exile in the land of Babylon. Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed, and the people taken away to a strange land. For generations they had lived with the assurance that God was especially present to them as a people in Jerusalem, in the Temple. But the Temple was destroyed. Jerusalem was along way away, and indications were, that at that time, the city was in ruins. So, how could God be present to the people with the Temple destroyed and Jerusalem far away? Enter Ezekiel. He had a vision of a wheel within a wheel, with eyes all around the rims. The meaning of the vision was centered in the wheels. The basic meaning was mobility. Far from being confine to the Temple, or to Jerusalem, God was with the people wherever they went.

For the people of Israel, who were discouraged and without hope, in exile, this was indeed good news. And so it was that this outrageous and outlandish figure of a man delivered a prophecy to the people that was absolutely crucial tot heir continued existence as the people of God. We see then, a figure like John the Baptizer in the New Testament.

We see an outrageous and outlandish figure of a man. But behind the appearance of each man was an absolutely crucial function: John in foretelling the coming of Jesus, and Ezekiel in his prophecies.

The stage, then, is set for today's reading. And in anticipation, and knowing something of Ezekiel, it would be easy to assume that the reading would portray an impossible situation, with Ezekiel ready to deliver a word of rescue, a word of deliverance from God. But such is not the case. As God speaks to Ezekiel in today's reading he says,

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. They are impudent and stubborn.

Well, at the end of this statement, and before the beginning of the next is one of those marvelous Old Testament places where the reader is almost invited to put words into the mouth of Ezekiel and into the mouth of God. For example, we might want Ezekiel to say something like, "Well, if these people are so stubborn and impudent, it really is OK if I do not go." In response to those reader produced words in Ezekiel's mouth, we might have God respond by saying, "Be quiet. I am not finished yet."

As we pick up the actual reading, God then says, **Whether they hear, or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.**

We hear God saying that there is a good possibility that this will not work. He is willing to admit that the people probably will not listen. But even so, he is insistent on sending Ezekiel, one of the more noticeable prophets in scripture, to be a prophet among his people. God says, **Even if they do not listen, they will know that a prophet has been among them.**

God does not come off angry here. He does not come across as threatening. These people of Israel are the people whom he loves. They are his people, the people of God. He wants to give them the best possible chance to hear his word, even though he knows they probably will ignore him. And so he sends one of the most noticeable people of the time, Ezekiel, to prophesy. Embodied in that man, Ezekiel, that impossible to ignore, outrageous man, was God's deep desire to be heard by his people. He would go to extraordinary lengths to be heard, even when it looked hopeless.

What was so important for the people to hear? What was so extraordinary that God would go to these lengths? One clue might be in Ezekiel's vision of the wheel within a wheel, which, when interpreted, meant that God would be with his people, not just in the Temple, not just in Jerusalem, but wherever they went. In the same way, in today's reading, with God going to extraordinary lengths to be heard by an unlistening people, he was saying, "I will be with you, even when you refuse to listen."

The applications of this story about God, his outrageous prophet, and his people are clear and important for us in the 21st century. God speaks to us in our lives with the same love and desire that was there when he approached the people of Israel through Ezekiel.

God always desires to be heard. God always wants to be encountered, to be known by us.

God will go to great lengths to be heard, even when it seems that we will not listen.

At issue is the permanence and constancy of God's speaking to us in our lives.

If you read through the book of Ezekiel, you realize that this was not just a man with a function, or a man with a job description. His very reason for living was to deliver God's word to God's people. Embodied in Ezekiel is a picture of a life completely devoted to delivering God's word. In today's reading is also a picture of the constancy and permanence of God speaking to us. And God does speak to us in many and various ways in life, even when we are most unresponsive. He speaks to us in the scripture, in the communion, in worship, in relationships, in reading, in praying.

In these days, God has gone to the extraordinary length of giving us his Son, Jesus Christ. It would be one thing to realize the deep desire of God to encounter us by reviewing the number of prophets and prominent people he has sent into our midst over generations.

But to realize his desire in the giving of his Son is to take it a giant step further. In fact, we would have to admit that in the mystery of the incarnation, we are not able to comprehend the depth of God's love for us, his desire to be known, to be heard by us.

Like Ezekiel, Jesus was not just a man with a function. His whole life was purposeful toward being the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

And even though we are not able to comprehend the depths of God's love for us, it is the work of faith, the work of belief for us to try. And that really leads us to the other part of the equation. The constancy and permanence of God's speaking in Ezekiel to an unresponsive people, exemplified his desire to know us. It also brought to light the unbelief, the doubt, the skepticism of the people.

As God speaks to us in these days through his Son, our unbelief, doubts, skepticism, and unresponsiveness are brought to light. In this world in the 21st century, there are numerous ways for us to doubt God's word, numerous ways for us to be unresponsive to God's speaking to us in our lives. In fact, to be unaware, ignorant of, and unresponsive to God's word in our lives is to be part of a strong current in our society.

And so, the work of believing, being aware, the work of being responsive to God, cuts across the grain of culture. To engage in that work with real intent is to run the risk of being distinctive and maybe even noticeable. Therefore we see before us a complex art for us to master: Being part of the world in which we live, but also doing the work of faith and belief without apology. I believe that Episcopalians are eminently qualified to do this work, to master this art.

There is no question about the constancy and permanence of God's interest in us, his love for us. We are able to appreciate it. But we are not able to fully comprehend it.

The variable is how committed we are to the life of faith, to the work of believing, to the vocation of being aware. The choices are obvious. The way can be difficult. But our Lord is always with us. Always. Amen.