

Scripture

Ezekiel 2:1-5

The Vision of the Scroll

2 He said to me: O mortal, [Son of Man] stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. 2 And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. 3 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. 4 The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord God." 5 Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

Mark 6:1-13

The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

6 He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. 2 On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! 3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

4 Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." 5 And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. 6 And he was amazed at their unbelief.

The Mission of the Twelve

Then he went about among the villages teaching. 7 He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. 8 He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; 9 but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. 10 He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. 11 If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." 12 So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. 13 They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Sermon: Stymied

Two very different readings this morning, but with similar themes. He heard about Ezekiel who was charged to speak a message that nobody would heed, and we also heard about Jesus who was received poorly in his home town and was therefore unable to show his family and friends the full power of the kingdom of God.

The two tales take place hundreds of years apart. Ezekiel was called to his prophetic ministry during the greatest crisis in the nation's history. The mighty nation of Israel had split into two nations, and the richer northern kingdom had been wiped out. The southern kingdom had held on, but in 597 BCE, the Babylonians had come to the city of Jerusalem and they conquered it. They had defeated the meager armies of the nation and had made Judah a vassal state, placing their own Babylonian puppet, Zedekiah, on the throne.

Although Zedekiah had been installed because the Babylonians thought they could control him, during the next ten years, Zedekiah became convinced that he should resist his Babylonian masters, proclaim independence from Babylon, and he would gain the power to do so by aligning Judah with Egypt. Zedekiah thought that by getting a tough new best friend he could set his people free from the Babylonians.

Of course, this only served to aggravate King Nebuchadnezzar of the Babylonians, so he returned to Jerusalem in 587 BCE, destroyed the city, and this time, removed the king and court to Babylon. Israel ceased to exist as a nation and remained in limbo for several centuries.

Ezekiel's visions began in the time between being conquered by the Babylonians in 597, and the return of the Babylonians ten years later when they totally destroyed the city and brought the temple to the ground.

In today's text God said to Ezekiel 'Mortal, I'm sending you to the family of Israel, a rebellious nation if there ever was one. They and their ancestors have fomented rebellion right up to the present. They're a hard case, these people to whom I'm sending you—hardened in their sin. Tell them, 'This is the Message of God, the Master.' They are a defiant bunch. Whether or not they listen, at least they'll know that a prophet has visited them. Don't be afraid of them, mortal, and don't be afraid of anything they say. Don't be afraid when living among them is like stepping on thorns or finding scorpions in your bed. Don't be afraid of their mean words or their hard looks. They're a bunch of rebels. Your job is to speak to them. Whether they listen is not your concern. They're hardened rebels.'

The message that Ezekiel was to bring the people was going to be hard for them to take. He was going to pronounce judgement upon them, and nobody ever wants to have someone point out what they are doing wrong. I don't like having my flaws and mistakes drawn to my attention. But it's not just that the message would be hard. The people were hard too.

Their hearts were hard; they aren't going to listen to Ezekiel anyway. Certainly, far before Ezekiel got to the good news at the end of his message they will have already tuned out and

dismissed their prophet and messenger, in the same way that they had already dismissed their God.

And yet God commanded Ezekiel to speak to this rebellious nation anyway. Why? So that they will know that a prophet has been among them. They won't listen to the message, they won't heed the message, and so their fate has already been sealed – they will be exiled and the temple will be destroyed. But at some point they will look back and remember that there was a prophet present during that time that their world was falling apart. God had not forgotten them, even while they were forgetting him. God was there and had warned them about the Babylonians, even though they didn't listen.

Moving on to the scripture from Mark in which Jesus visited his home town, we see the exact same thing happening. While Jesus was travelling around the sea of Galilee and Capernaum he was surrounded by crowds, eagerly seeking him out to see him perform miracles. People recognized him as one who spoke with the authority of God, and who worked with the power of God. He was a star; a celebrity. But not so at home.

Rather than seek him out, the people of Nazareth seemed to pay him no mind at all. He was there for a few days and he had to wait until the Sabbath, when everyone gathered at the Synagogue to worship, to finally get a chance to talk to them as a group. People were at first impressed with the way he spoke, saying 'What is this wisdom that has been given to him?' And later exclaimed 'What deeds of power are being done by his hands!'

But they soon lost their amazement and began to say 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James, and Joses, and Judas, and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him. Their hearts became hardened, they became jealous of him, thinking 'who does this man think he is? He's no different than us, so why should we listen to him?'

I do find it interesting that a big part of their complaint against Jesus is that he's just a regular guy with no special education or training – just a small town carpenter who wandered away for a while and now has returned with great words of wisdom and knowledge. They resent him for it, they think he's putting on airs and pretending to be something that he is not. But if we stop and think for a moment, if Jesus had no special education, if he wasn't raised in a big city palace surrounded by important and wise people and tutors and mentors, and yet he seems to have all this great wisdom and understanding – if it's not from worldly sources, then his wisdom and power can only come from God.

Instead of ridiculing him, the people should have been recognizing the hand of God on Jesus. But they didn't. They, like their forefathers, were hard hearted and rebellious. They rejected Jesus as they rejected the prophets of old, and in doing so they rejected God Himself.

As a result, Jesus was unable to perform many miracles among them. He healed a few people, but on the whole he was powerless. This is very significant – as human beings we have limited

power. We are able to build things, create beauty in art, even get to the moon – but we can't create life, we can't heal with a touch, and we generally lack wisdom and understand very little about the world that we are manipulating.

Our power is quite limited, and yet, according to scripture, we have the power to block God. We can't perform miracles, but we can stop them. Think about what that means for a moment.

Of all the things that we can control, our most potent power, is the power to deny God and the works of God. Our superpower is destructive. We are not superheroes, we are super-villains. This is the power we have - to deny, to denigrate, and to destroy. Over and over this is shown to us – over and over again in the bible, throughout history, in the news every day. We are the people who made nuclear bombs, who enslave other countries to produce our cheap dollar store goods, who lock up immigrants, and who destroy the very world we live in, the world that supports us. We are a defiant bunch, a rebellious people if there ever was one. Puffed up and proud, unwilling to listen to what God has to say.

This may sound harsh – we don't like to think of ourselves this way. But I know deep in my own heart that I have much more of this pride and over-confidence in my own ways than I would like to admit in any detail here this morning. I am rebellious, I am defiant.

And here is the effect of that defiance – nobody listened to Ezekiel, they didn't turn back to God and so God was not able to save their city and nation. Nobody listened to Jesus in Nazareth, they didn't turn to him, and so he was not able to heal and restore them.

Are we any better today? We think of Jesus being beaten and crucified and how horrible that was and then we think that we would never have done such a thing, were we there. But picture this – by our own disbelief, by our own rebellion today, we place Jesus in chains. Our defiance, our self-reliance, the fact that we don't come to Jesus truly expecting miracles anymore leaves Jesus standing in the middle of his own church with his hands tied behind his back. That's our power – the power to negate the power of God.

This rebelliousness, rejection, and disbelief is seen when we pray without really expecting that God will do what we ask. We go through the motions, expecting nothing. Worse – we don't pray at all. We assure people that we will indeed pray for them and then we don't actually follow through – not unlike the hopes and prayers that we hear about every time there is a shooting at a school or concert.

We talk of Jesus as king, but then we place him into a kingship in the same way that the Babylonians placed Zedekiah on the throne – we give him a nominal title, but we don't grant him any real authority or power. A puppet king.

So, what then is real faith? We see it in the blind man who heard Jesus was passing by and sat in the road calling out 'Jesus! Jesus!' Would we do that? Would we call out to Jesus on a street corner, not caring who could hear?

The tax man climbing a tree to see Jesus – very undignified behaviour – would we do that? Would we follow Jesus through a crowd just to touch the hem of his robe? When we ask Jesus for something do we trust in his answer like the centurion with the sick daughter who said – since you say she is healed I am content to go home, because I know what you have already done. Do we take Jesus at his word?

In the book of Ezekiel, it started off poorly. The people were rebellious, but God sent a messenger anyway – first with a word of reproach to get them back on the right path, but then with words of hope and blessing.

In Mark's story things also began poorly, with the people doubting and dismissing. But Jesus carried on despite them to finish his mission of reconciling all of humanity with God.

Consistently we see that God does work for the good, but we are able to delay that good. God has given us free will, and we can use that will to either turn to him and live in the power of his Kingdom, or we can use our will to reject God and live in our own squalor. We are back to the two kingdoms again. Do we want to live in our little shadow kingdom – or God's eternal kingdom?

The message repeated over and over again throughout the bible is that God is continually knocking on the doors of our kingdoms, inviting us to join with him. Again, my attention is drawn to the stained glass to my left 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock.'

What are we doing with that invitation? Do we invite Jesus in and sit him at the head of the table? Does Jesus have pride of place in our homes, or do we tie him up in the basement? Jesus is humble, he will accept whichever way we treat him. But we are the ones who will lose by choosing poorly.

The people of Judah suffered when the Babylonians returned to fully destroy what was left of their country. The people of Nazareth suffered under all that ailed them because they would not allow Jesus full reign.

The sad thing is that when we choose to reject Jesus, or accept him in a small measured way while still continuing to rely on our own resources, we think that we are hedging our bets, or playing it safe. The truth is that when we are swayed by the foolish notion that we are fully in charge within our own kingdoms that we are not playing it safe – our self-reliance is our downfall because it is an illusion.

The choice is, but we have to consciously make that choice – it doesn't happen on its own. We have to decide which kingdom we want to be in. We can't do both.

As Joshua said unto all the people of Israel, choose you this day whom you will serve.

Our reply should be, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

And all God's people said – Amen!