

July 23, 2017

Lesson 8: Ezekiel Call

Scripture: Ezekiel 3: 1-1

Context:

It only fits that as we looked to the prophet Jeremiah last week, we move to the story of Ezekiel, another prophet who rattled the Israelites in a difficult period of their history. As recorded, Ezekiel was a priest who had been exiled to Babylon along with other members of the Judean elite in 597 BCE.¹ The book of Ezekiel is one of the most unusual of the prophetic books as there are bizarre visions and stories. There was even a debate among early rabbis about whether to include it in the canon of scripture.² Yet, the book was kept for the prophetic visions and insight into the relationship between Yahweh and Israel.

A reader will notice in reading Ezekiel that the book is mostly prose and not poetry. The book is also more narrative with a chronological order. The book starts with the prophet's inaugural vision and concludes with the vision of a restored Jerusalem. Ezekiel is mostly autobiographical in third person throughout most of the book. He is considered a contemporary of Jeremiah, but his prophetic career focused in Babylonia. Throughout his career, Ezekiel announces the sins of Israel that have gotten them there as punishment and will continue to devastate them in the centuries to come. As a priest, Ezekiel's job was to also to remind people of how they were to worship and remember the holiness code. Throughout the book, we hear about the "glory of Yahweh" which is mobile.³ While most of this "glory of Yahweh" was associated with the Ark of the Covenant and the Temple, we see a shift as Ezekiel notes the "glory of Yahweh" as God following the people wherever they go, especially with those who have gone into exile in Babylon (Ezekiel 11: 23). It is one of the first times we see in this era a writer noting God's presence outside the Temple or the Ark of the Covenant.

Throughout the rest of the book, Ezekiel proclaims the oracle of the nations (chapters 25-32) as he predicts the fall of surrounding nations and predicts doom and gloom. He also notes that Israel will be restored and that Jerusalem will eventually be restored as well. He ends with a note of hope, but there are definitely apocalyptic visions before the land and the people are restored.

Even in the beginning, the call of Ezekiel shows a prophet who is not afraid to speak his mind and has no problem announcing that his words will not be easy to swallow or digest. His call is one that is similar to other prophets in the ancient world. Given a scroll with everything for the people to whom the prophet speaks, the prophet consumes the scroll and becomes God's mouthpiece. But they are not easy words to speak. These words given by God will make people upset and they will not want to hear them. Just like Jeremiah though, Ezekiel is called. He has even been physically designed so that he can meet the people and the power to stand before them. Unlike Jeremiah,

¹ Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 384.

² *Ibid.*, 384.

³ *Ibid.* 391.

Ezekiel knows the power of his words and appears to have no problem to speaking to God's people even if it "steps on their toes."

Application:

I will never forget a conversation I had with one of my members at my last church about the book of Ezekiel. In talking about spiritual disciplines, she told me she went through the Old Testament writings and prophets because she wasn't as familiar with them. As she went through, she highlighted favorite verses so she could revisit them or share them with others. But not all books had highlights. She told me: "I didn't like Ezekiel as much. He did not get a lot of highlights." We both laughed and I went back and reread some of the passages of the book and could indeed understand why her highlighter remained on the side table as she read.

Even as we read of Ezekiel's call story, we are reminded that being a priest/prophet is not an easy thing. Sometimes hard things have to be said and difficult subjects must be broached. People are put into positions where they have to say or speak about things that may make people mad or upset. Even people who are good religious thoughtful people get their feathers ruffled from time to time. All of us have at times been so stuck in our ways and thinking that we become blind to truths or realities about ourselves and others.

Several months ago, I read *When the Church Bell Rung Racist* by Donald Collins. The book focuses on the AWF and the Civil Rights Struggle and the various responses by the church, clergy, and the conference as a whole. Perhaps the most disappointing was to find that if some ministers preached on integration or the sinfulness of segregation, they were asked to leave their congregations. Even as they spoke what they felt God was putting on their heart, they were turned away from their own brothers and sisters of Christ.

As I read the book, I felt convicted. How many times had I silenced others who might be telling me things I needed to hear? And how did I miss others as brothers and sisters in Christ by dismissing their experience or thoughts? It is hard to have people question or touch deeply held convictions that we all possess. But if we are God's people, then we will understand that we are all sinners and from time to time need to remember how we have failed to love God and neighbor.

Several times in my preaching, I have had people tell me: "Preacher, you stepped on my toes today." The first time I heard it I had to google the phrase because it was a turn from the usual: "Good job," or crickets you get when you ask for feedback. As I looked at the phrase, I thought of all the times that professors, teachers, mentors, or other preachers had preached or said something where I felt convicted. I realized that we all "need our toes stepped on" occasionally and that it is God's way of helping us remember that we are God's people.

Who are your Ezekiels? And where might God be calling you to be an Ezekiel in our world? When we've had our toes stepped on, we are also reminded that we can and should do better. We are also given the empowerment to help others do better in life as well. As a Bishop in seminary once told me, we are called to always "speak the truth in love," and God will take care of the rest.

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