



Liturgical Day: The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Date: November 15, 2009
Sermon Title: The Word of the Prophet

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I've had this image for years of the story the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) tells us about God's people. It seems to me that Ancient Israel is like a railroad train, flying down the track. When its wheels stay on the track, all goes well, and they end up where they are supposed to be. But time and time again they fall off the track. The train grounds to a halt and sits in disrepair, until God sends a prophet to get them back on track again. It sometimes isn't an easy thing to do (they get accustomed to sitting there, and begin to enjoy it). But when they respond to the prophet and do the work they need to do in order to be right again, the train gets up and running, and all is well until they fall off the track again – which always seems to happen sooner than you might expect. Then the whole cycle begins again.

Those of us who are reading through the Bible in 90 days are more aware than ever that Israel spent a good deal of its history falling off the track. Book after book have told the story of how bad kings lead the people astray; how empty hearts caused people to offer worship that offended God; how a lack of concern for orphans and widows indicated something terribly wrong at the center of Israel's life together. As you read the story, it begins to seem that this train spent more time off the track than on it.

Israel was well off-track by the time Ezekiel appeared on the scene. He began his prophetic career some five years after the Babylonian armies sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and carried off the leaders of Judah into captivity. The Assyrians had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel more than a hundred years earlier. This meant that the entire kingdom once ruled by Saul, David and Solomon had been destroyed by foreign armies. The grandeur of the temple had been devastated. The promises God made to Abraham were now in jeopardy – and God's people began to ask some hard questions. How could this have happened? Why did God not fight on behalf of Israel? Had God abandoned them? Would things ever be the same?

The book of Ezekiel is an attempt to answer questions like these, and Ezekiel's answer is fairly simple. He believed that when God's people stayed on track, everything went well. God was with them. The nation prospered. They lived as a sign to the world of God's presence. But when God's people got off track, they suffered. God opposed them. The nation declined. And all the world became aware that God's blessing was not with them. Ezekiel was called to be a prophet to God's people. In other words, his job was to help them understand this. He understood the sinfulness of Ancient Israel, and proclaimed that if they continued in that sinfulness, it would lead to nothing but destruction. But if they turned from their sin, and back to God, they would begin to prosper again.

Modern thinkers are right to observe that this sounds a lot like works-righteousness – a concept that stands in direct opposition to the good news of Jesus Christ. For those of you unfamiliar with those terms, let me put it very simply: righteousness is when our relationship with God is right – is in good order. Works-righteousness is the belief that if we work hard enough, we can put our relationship with God right – in good order. That plays out over and over again in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, when a King worked hard at obeying God's law, the nation became right with God and prospered. When a King didn't work hard at being obedient, the nation was not right with God, and suffered.

LESSONS:
DANIEL 12:1-3
PSALM 16 (9)
HEBREWS 10:11-14 [15-18] 19-25

ST. MARK 13:1-8
SEMICONTINUOUS SERIES
1 SAMUEL 1:4-20
1 SAMUEL 2:1-10 (1)

BIBLE IN 90 DAYS
READING
EZEKIEL 2:1-5

PRAYER OF THE DAY
ALMIGHTY GOD, YOUR SOVEREIGN PURPOSE BRINGS SALVATION TO BIRTH. GIVE US FAITH TO BE STEADFAST AMID THE TUMULTS OF THIS WORLD, TRUSTING THAT YOUR KINGDOM COMES AND YOUR WILL IS DONE THROUGH YOUR SON, JESUS CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR AND LORD. AMEN.

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God's work. Our hands.

These days, God has chosen to work things differently with us. We are right with God, not because of the work we do, or the decisions we make, or the beliefs we embrace, but because of the grace we know in Jesus Christ. His faithfulness is the source of our redemption, and so works-righteousness is rejected. With that in mind, it is obvious that we don't any longer read Ezekiel for insights on how to make ourselves right with God.

But Ezekiel is still important to us in two ways. First of all, his emphasis on righteousness and faithfulness helps us measure our own behavior, and helps us come to understand how badly in need of forgiveness we are. Second, his teaching helps us to ask the question: "Now that we know we are right with God, what will we do?" Ezekiel's message is a challenge to us, calling us to reject our selfish and self-indulgent instincts, and instead, to live in a way that is pleasing to God. As our Stewardship Team would remind us, that is how we show our gratitude for what God has done on our behalf. The prophetic word is one way that God gets our attention, and directs us in what it means to live a life that is pleasing to God.

There is one problem: in order for that to work, we need to be open to the word that challenges us. That is where the problem came in during Ezekiel's time. No matter how persistent he was; no matter how clear he was; no matter how courageous he was, the leaders of his time rejected his message. He pointed out their sin, calling them to repent, and they refused to acknowledge that they were sinful. Because they refused to mend their ways, God allowed them to be conquered, and carried off into captivity. As Ezekiel himself put it:

Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them. [Ezekiel 2:5]

The people of God refused to hear the message of Ezekiel. They were certain that he was wrong and they were right. So they ignored him, and by doing so they prepared the way for their own destruction.

I'd love to tell you that this was a problem Ancient Israel faced, and conquered, and now is not an issue for us. But I can't, because in some ways things are even worse today than they were back then. These days people are more certain than ever that they are right, and anyone who disagrees with them must be wrong. We have even shaped the way we follow news to facilitate this foolishness. We now have targeted news delivery systems that feed us only the slant on the news that we want to believe. Conservatives listen to Rush Limbaugh and liberals listen to Ed Schultz. Conservatives watch Fox News, liberals watch MSNBC. None of these broadcasts are interested in challenging our presuppositions or questioning our biases. They have been specifically designed to help us believe what we want to believe, whether or not our beliefs are grounded in what is real or true or righteous. Prophets like Ezekiel are shouted down these days – ignored and rejected because we prefer to maintain the illusion that we are correct, and anyone who disagrees with us is wrong.

We even see that in the life of the church. In our own ELCA, whether we are arguing about homosexuality or abortion or capital punishment or nuclear armaments, there are many among us who are so certain they are absolutely right, and that anyone who imagines to disagree with them is absolutely wrong, that they have lost the ability to have faithful conversations with one another about these issues. Even worse, when some of these groups don't get their way in decisions that are made by our national church, they leave the ELCA (and those voices that disagree with them), and form a separate group of like-minded believers.

On the one hand, I admire their confidence, and certainty and courage. But on the other hand, I am concerned that they put themselves in a very dangerous position by doing so. They align themselves with church leaders who, for thousands of years, have rejected the message of God's prophets when it called them to make changes in what they believed and what they did. Bishop Mark Hanson of our ELCA recently met with the ELCA Synod Council, and here is a portion of what he said to them:

Hanson said he is concerned that because of differences that exist among some leaders and members on ministry policies, people are retreating into "like-minded enclaves to reinforce the strength of their convictions and the clarity that those not in the room are wrong...The Holy Spirit poured out upon us, calls us, moves us toward one another in times such as these rather than into retreat and withdrawal into like-minded enclaves."

You see, when we have very strong beliefs about matters that are important to faithfulness, we need to embrace them with humility. And we need to remember that when a voice cries out in opposition to what we

ourselves believe, there is a chance – a real chance – that this voice is the voice of God, seeking to get our attention, to call us in a new direction, and to allow us to be faithful once again. The last thing we want to do is to huddle by ourselves in the corner, and imagine that we have come to understand the whole truth of God. Whether we are on one side of an argument or the other, we need those conversation partners from the other side. As we listen to them, and take them seriously, it makes it more possible that we might end up seeing what God's will actually is.

That's the role Ezekiel played in his day. His message was not one that the leaders of Judah wanted to hear. But it was one that God needed them to hear. And once they did, it opened up the possibility that they would repent, begin going in God's direction, and experience the blessing of life that God wanted them to know. That's how the prophetic message worked then. That's how it works now. The question is: will we be like those ancient people who completely disregarded the voice of the prophet that was calling them to change? Or will we be humble enough and faithful enough to take that voice seriously, always remembering that it just might be the voice of God? A pretty good question for us to end with this morning, I think.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (November 14, 2009)

Gospel Lesson; English Text: ⁱ

^{13:1} As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" ² Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

³ When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" ⁵ Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶ Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. ⁷ When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. ⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{13:1} Καὶ ἐκπορευομένου αὐτοῦ ἐκ τοῦ ἱεροῦ λέγει αὐτῷ εἰς τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ· διδάσκαλε, ἴδε ποταποὶ λίθοι καὶ ποταπαὶ οἰκοδομαί. ² καὶ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτῷ· βλέπεις ταύτας τὰς μεγάλας οἰκοδομάς; οὐ μὴ ἀφεθῆ ὡδε λίθος ἐπὶ λίθον ὃς οὐ μὴ καταλυθῆ
³ Καὶ καθημένου αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸ ὄρος τῶν ἐλαιῶν κατέναντι τοῦ ἱεροῦ ἐπηρώτα αὐτὸν κατ' ἰδίαν Πέτρος καὶ Ἰάκωβος καὶ Ἰωάννης καὶ Ανδρέας· ⁴ εἰπὸν ἡμῖν, πότε ταῦτα ἔσται καὶ τί τὸ σημεῖον ὅταν μέλλῃ ταῦτα συντελεῖσθαι πάντα; ⁵ ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἤρξατο λέγειν αὐτοῖς· βλέπετε μὴ τις ὑμᾶς πλανήσῃ· ⁶ πολλοὶ ἐλεύσονται ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι μου λέγοντες ὅτι ἐγὼ εἰμι, καὶ πολλοὺς πλανήσουσιν. ⁷ ὅταν δὲ ἀκούσητε πολέμους καὶ ἀκοὰς πολέμων, μὴ θροεῖσθε· δεῖ γενέσθαι, ἀλλ' οὐπω τὸ τέλος. ⁸ ἐγερθήσεται γὰρ ἔθνος ἐπ' ἔθνος καὶ βασιλεία ἐπὶ βασιλείαν, ἔσονται σεισμοὶ κατὰ τόπους, ἔσονται λιμοί· ἀρχὴ ὠδίνων ταῦτα. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Lectionary.aspx>

ⁱⁱ St. Mark 13:1-8, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Mark 13:1-8, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).

“The Bible in 90 Days” Lesson:

^{2:1} [God] said to me: “O mortal, 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.” ^{iv}

**Scheduled Readings for
“The Bible in 90 Days”
9/13/2009 - 12/12/2009**

<u>Date</u>	<u>Begin Reading At</u>	<u>Sermon Based On</u>
9/13	Genesis 1:1	Genesis 1:1-19
9/20	Leviticus 1:1	Exodus 16:2-15
9/27	Deuteronomy 23:12	Deuteronomy 6:1-9
10/4	1 Samuel 28:20	Joshua 24:1-3, 14-18
10/11	1 Chronicles 1:1	1 Kings 3:5-12
10/18	Nehemiah 13:15	Nehemiah 1:4-11a
10/25	Psalms 89:14	Job 38:1-11
11/1	Isaiah 14:1	Psalms 104:24-34, 35b
11/8	Jeremiah 33:23	Isaiah 25:6-9
11/15	Daniel 9:1	Ezekiel 2:1-5
11/22	Matthew 26:57	Micah 6:1-8
11/29	Acts 6:8	John 20:19-31
12/6	Hebrews 1:1	Romans 5:1-11

^{iv} Ezekiel 2:1-5, New Revised Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).