

July 8, 2018  
Seventh Sunday of Pentecost  
Rev. Heidi Rodrick-Schnaath

In the Old Testament there are two kinds of prophets. The *nevi'im* which means *spokesperson* and the *ro'eh* which is translated as *seer*. The seers were an organized group. They had a guild and they were attached to a local shrine or temple. You could hire one of the *ro'eh* to do divination, perform rituals or sacrifices and they were also scribes. *Ro'eh* was a job title. They were professional priests, trained and ready to tell you things about the future.

The other kind of prophets – the *nevi'im* were not organized this way. They were typically recruited by God. They acted as God's spokesperson and were seen as moral teachers, sent to help God's people get their act together.

In Judaism, the Talmud recognizes seven female prophets: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah and Esther. And 48 male prophets which includes Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah and from our first lesson today, Ezekiel.

Now, you may wonder why God sent people like Ezekiel to talk to the Israelites. Why didn't God just speak to them directly, and the reason is pretty simple. After the Israelites were freed from Egypt, when they were in the wilderness, God gave them the ten commandments, but they were so overwhelmed by hearing from God directly, that they asked if they could please have a go-between. From then on, when God wanted to tell the people something, he told Moses and then Moses told the people.

When Moses got to be older and he knew that he would not be going with the rest of the group into the Promised Land, there was a concern that the people wouldn't have an appointed spokesperson any more. But God reassured Moses by saying, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command." And that's what God did with Ezekiel. He is one of the prophets, that God chose and presented to the people as the designated spokesperson. It wasn't Ezekiel's chosen career. It wasn't his idea to go out and tell people what God wanted them to know- he was chosen.

Ezekiel was from Judah and probably came from the city of Jerusalem. He was one of thousands who were deported to Babylon as a part of King Nebuchadnezzar's war with Judah. There were a series of battles and ultimately Jerusalem falls, King Solomon's Temple was destroyed and by 587BCE, a majority of the Judeans were being held captive in Babylon. It wasn't until 60 years later when King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon, that the Judeans were finally able to return home.

When his story begins, Ezekiel who is a faithful follower of Yahweh, is in Babylon sitting by a river when suddenly there is a stormy wind, followed by flashing fire and then he sees these four faced creatures. Each has four wings and below there are these wheels within wheels that carry the creatures in any direction. Above all the creatures is a heavenly throne which holds the glory of God. It is incredible! Whether it is out of fear or shock or respect for the Almighty, when Ezekiel sees the throne and the glory of God, he falls flat on his face.

Which is where we come in. Ezekiel is lying flat on his face and he can hear a voice speaking to him. The voice calls him to stand up, but he doesn't stand up on his own. Instead it is the spirit of God which pulls him up on to his feet, like a marionette on strings. Then God tells Ezekiel what he wants him to do.

“Go and speak to the people of Israel. They have been rebellious, just like their ancestors. They’ve been defiant. They’re stubborn and hardhearted and sinful. They’re stuck in their ways. But I have chosen you to speak to them.

“Go to the Israelites and tell them, “This is what the Lord has to say.” And whether those rebels listen or not, at least they’ll know that a true prophet has spoken to them.

“Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid of what they say or the looks they give you. Even if it feels like walking barefooted through a briar patch or like finding scorpions in your bed - don’t be afraid. Have faith!

“Your job is to speak to them. Be brave and give them my message. Whether they listen or not, doesn’t matter. Your job is to just deliver my message.”

And so begins Ezekiel’s career as a spokesperson for God. He doesn’t always have an easy time of it. God comes to him more than once and you might remember that Ezekiel is the one that God calls to speak to a valley of dry bones. “Prophecy to the bones!” God says. “Because, even though it seems impossible, those bones can live!”

Ezekiel’s job was not to question God about what he was to do or how. He was just supposed to preach God’s word. Share it! Tell it! The fact that the job may sound hard is probably one of the better signs that the speaker really has been sent by God. The more difficult it is for the messenger to deliver the message, the more likely it is that the message really is from God. Jesus is perhaps the best example of that theory. He was so focused – so intent on delivering the good news of God’s kingdom – he was willing to give everything he had. Everything he was. And he did. He went to hell and back, preaching the good news of forgiveness and grace.

+ + +

With Jesus, the role of God’s designated spokesperson changed. Instead of one person speaking to a whole nation of stubborn children – Jesus called all his followers to share God’s word. First the twelve were sent out two by two. Then it was seventy and then the number grew and grew, until it included you and me. The church, the whole church, is called to speak the good news. To be the nevi-im of God.

Like Ezekiel we are called to be concerned more about sharing the message than with counting heads. And like the twelve, we are to be more intent on the quality of our message than the conditions under which we deliver it. And like both Ezekiel and the disciples, we have been told that God will be with us and that it is God’s word not our own that we are sharing.

And that makes a difference. That’s what enables a spokesperson for God to be brave and speak out. It’s not me and my word. It’s the word of God.

If God can give strength to Ezekiel during one of the worst periods in Israel’s history, then God can certainly use us. God can use the church of today – this congregation – to do incredible things, because it’s not about us. It’s about the word of God.

+ + +

Have you ever heard a piece of news that was so good you couldn’t wait to share it? Sometimes it isn’t even all that important.

It’s the first day of Spring and Rita’s is giving away free water ice.

There’s a two-for one sale on sweaters at Macy’s.

And don’t get me started on the wonders of eBates and online shopping. I can go on and on about that one. If we can get jazzed up about things like that, we should get really excited about sharing the word of God. Wouldn’t you think? We receive the forgiveness of all our sins! On a weekly basis! That kind of news ought to empower people to go out and share their experiences- tell

their stories, large and small – exciting or quiet – comforting or exhilarating, but it doesn't seem to work that way. The idea that we are God's spokespeople, that God uses ordinary mortals like us to get the job done and that God will empower and strengthen us so that the word gets out --- that idea is often met with little enthusiasm and lukewarm expectations.

In a commentary on our first reading, Andrew Connors suggests that what enabled Ezekiel to speak on behalf of God was the fact that he had heard God speak first. He had been blessed by the word of God. They had a working relationship. Connors goes on to say that for the modern Christian, we claim that our encounter with God happens most clearly in worship. This is the time and the place where we claim that we can hear God's word most clearly. We are fed and nourished so that we can go out energized and restored and ready to be faithful speakers of God's word, but it doesn't seem to always work that way.

More and more Christians find it harder and harder to be in worship on Sunday mornings. You can see it in the statistics. You can tell it's true by the kinds of things pastors and bishops and church councils worry about. There are hundreds of books and conferences and blogs about whether or not the church is dying and what can we possibly do to keep it from happening?

For folks of a certain age, we can't help but wonder what changed. When I was a girl, we went to worship every Sunday unless we were on vacation and even then, we might be at church camp or we might be worshipping with grandparents in their congregation. As kids we never questioned it and we didn't dare suggest that we weren't going. You got up and you went. That's what we did in our family. And we weren't completely odd and unusual. Going to church was like brushing your teeth. You didn't need to schedule it on the calendar, it was a habit and you just did it. But things have changed. My husband has to work some Sundays so it's been four weeks since he's been to worship. It's not that he doesn't want to come, but if he wants to keep his job, he has to work some Sunday mornings.

Most families with kids have complicated schedules where nothing can be assumed, except maybe work and school. As a result time at church, time in worship has become another activity to plug into Outlook or add to the family calendar. So what do we do?

We can't bully people into changing their schedule. Guilting folks to come to worship has never been a good idea but how do we keep on keeping on?

Ezekiel's story serves as a reminder that at the heart of what makes the work of the church possible, is not a calendar of activities but interaction with the Holy. Potentially it should be the kind of encounter that knocks you off your feet or fills you with the spirit of God. Our encounter with the Holy carries with it a call to go out and do something, be something, share something. If it doesn't, then we've not been listening to the Holy, because interacting with God always leads to something more.

In the Keller's Corner this week is the story of Earl Young, who built these incredible stone houses up until the 1970s. They're called mushroom houses or Hobbit houses, because of their shape and appearance. The roofs curve and swoop, following the contours of the land. The walls are made of carefully stacked boulders that Young found in the woods and sometimes buried until he had a home for them. People in Michigan want to buy Young's houses, but while the homes are beautiful and in great demand, when Young died – house construction ceased. The problem is that he didn't teach his way of building to the next generation of architects. He didn't inspire a movement. His building style died with him.

Jesus understood that in order for the church to continue and grow, we need to go and tell. Even if it seems like we are yelling from the middle of a weed patch, we need to keep at it. God told

Ezekiel that what is important is not the results but the activity. Don't worry about how many people are listening, just do what you think needs to be done.

At the same time, remember that we aren't just the ones who tell the story, we're also the ones who need to hear it. As the old song says, "I love to tell the story to those who know it best because they are hungry and thirsting to hear it like the rest."

I firmly believe that the church will not die. And if it seems like it might, we need to remember that God knows how to bring life out of something that has died. God knows how to bring light from dying embers. God can create something out of nothingness.

We need to be looking for new ways to share the good news of God. Keep trying new recipes. Going to new places. Singing new songs and sharing the old. We need to keep telling the story. To each other and to those who haven't heard.

We are God's spokespersons. This is our calling. May you be blessed to share the story in new ways and in old.