

It Is a Tough Job but Somebody Has To Do It. **Ezekiel 2:1-5 and Mark 6:1-6**

Ezekiel 2:1 And he said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you." ² And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. ³ And he said to me, "Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. ⁴ The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' ⁵ And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.

Mark 6:1 He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ² And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works 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 And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household." ⁵ And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. ⁶ And he marveled because of their unbelief.

And he went about among the villages teaching.

⁷ And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He charged 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 put on two tunics. ¹⁰ And he said to them, "Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. ¹¹ And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." ¹² So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. ¹³ And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I wonder how someone becomes an official spokesman for a company or an organization. Do they just grab someone and tell them, "Starting as of this moment we assign you to speak on behalf of the organization." I would think that such an influential position must pass a rigorous vetting process. Such a person must be well spoken, educated, and unflappable. I also think that a good characteristic for a spokesman is the ability to keep his opinions to him or herself. The organization's words are the spokesman's words. It sounds like a tough job but I suppose somebody has to do it!

I chuckle when I remember that once upon a time I was an official spokesman for the U.S. Navy. Just out of university, 22 years old, and commissioned an Ensign I was sent to an admiral's staff. My collateral duty became my primary duty, public affairs officer for Commander Cruiser Destroyer Flotilla 12. It sounds impressive doesn't it? I learned my duties on the job and through a Navy correspondence course. I guess I was vetted in a sense; I received a top-secret clearance. I wondered in amazement during those years whenever I listened to the news and the broadcaster reported, "A spokesman for the Navy said..." I was not just the spokesman for the Admiral, but for the entire Navy. I was as low on the totem pole as you could get and yet, I was that reliable source. I repeated the official story word for word as I received it, and sometimes I had a small part in crafting the story. It was a tough job but somebody had to do it, and for two years that somebody was me.

I remember two incidents in particular. Once I was flown off the carrier, U.S.S. Intrepid (CVS11) to the American Embassy in Athens, Greece, where I was to arrange for residents of Athens to gain access to the carrier for tours. However, even back then the Greeks had penchant for protests, riots, and overthrowing the government. Fifteen minutes into my flight I received a message from the Chief of Staff to forget about arranging tours and enjoy my three-day stay in Athens. The tours had been canceled because there was concern about a terrorism incident. I had packed only uniforms for the trip; consequently, I was afraid to leave the hotel and go strolling around the streets.

My second experience was not so pleasant. Two African-American sailors from a Mayport ship became embroiled in an altercation with a group of local yokels. One sailor was beaten and left broken along the side of the road. The other ran away, attempting to hide in the tidal marshes around Mayport. He tried to swim a channel and drowned in the process. I saw the black and white photographs of his body after they found it three days later. The incident never became a national story; I had only to deal with the local press. The job of official spokesman can be difficult but somebody has to do it.

Our Old Testament and Gospel lessons closely correspond this morning. They both tell us about official spokesmen for God – Ezekiel the prophet, Jesus, and the disciples. All of them found speaking on God's behalf difficult but a service that needed to be done.

God sent Ezekiel to the Jewish captives in Babylon -- a dispirited, beaten, and hopeless people. Their angst was incalculable. How had they fallen from the lofty heights of kings David and Solomon to the humiliation of displaced prisoners? How had pagans destroyed the holy city of Jerusalem, raided and burned the temple where God had put his name? The captives concluded that God either had rejected them for their sins and disobedience or He was incapable of defending them. Which would be worse? Probably the former, but God was not defeated and He had not rejected His people. The people suffered the consequences of their idolatry, rebelliousness and selfishness, but even at their lowest God worked to restore them.

God called Ezekiel as His spokesman. Ezekiel was to take God's message, and only God's message to God's people. It was a difficult job, no doubt about it. Listen carefully to what God said to Ezekiel: "Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels, who have rebelled against me... [They] are impudent and stubborn..." (Ezekiel 2:3-4). Talk about a dead end job. Your customer doesn't want what your selling, in most cases couldn't care less, and has already made up his or her mind. It was a tough job but somebody had to do it

Remarkably, God never addresses Ezekiel by name. Ninety-three times God refers to Ezekiel as "son of man," thereby emphasizing the distance between the Creator and the created. Ezekiel lives among the stubborn people and he is one of them. God's chosen messenger is no better than the people to whom the message was sent. They are all sinners but God's message is that He desires most strongly to restore them. He calls them to repentance; He calls them to faith; He gives them a second, third and fourth chance because they are weak, but – He loves them none-the-less. They are His children. God gives Ezekiel the task of taking God's message, Word for Word, no interpretation or alteration, to God's people. The Spirit Himself will work through that Word to restore the people.

Five hundred years later Jesus visited the town of his childhood, Nazareth. The people there knew Him, at least they thought they did. I have often wondered if there was anything remarkable about Jesus as a child. Certainly He was obedient, no trouble at all, and maybe a bit unbelievable at times. Most likely He was a kind, considerate neighbor. However, did He stick out like a sore thumb or did His humbleness and spirit of service make Him blend into the background? Certainly His brothers mentioned in the text and His sisters were normal children. Would their normal lives have masked Jesus' uniqueness? Did His neighbors talk about Him?

One day Jesus quietly walked out of town and began His ministry. Shortly thereafter His former neighbors began hearing stories about Him. Jesus performed this miracle or He claimed that God had said such and such. Sometime later Jesus returned to his hometown because his former neighbors needed his message as well. One Sabbath morning he delivered the Sabbath message in the local synagogue. The people listened carefully; they were curious to learn if the reality matched the gossip. He certainly spoke as if he knew what he was talking about; the people were amazed. "What is this," they asked? "Isn't this little Jesus? Don't we know His family? What makes Him special now?" Familiarity leads to contempt, and so the people of Nazareth didn't believe or receive God's Word from God's Son. He worked only a couple of miracles because they were gifts, signs, and not parlor tricks to perform on demand. And so He departed. His neighbors' response stands in stark contrast to last week's gospel lesson wherein people threw themselves at Jesus feet. A woman with an issue of blood was healed. Her faith saved her. A little girl got up from her deathbed. The Word gave her life.

I think for years my pastor and mentor assumed I would replace him when he retired. I think he might have been a bit disappointed when I showed little interest in following in his footsteps, but I was concerned that people thought I could replace him. No one could. And since I was a son of the congregation, the people knew me, they knew Marilyn, they knew our children. "Isn't this Rory? Didn't we see him grow up? Wasn't he ordained here? Can he be God's messenger, God's prophet to us?"

A disappointed Jesus departed Nazareth but He did not reject it or its people. Jesus did not write the people off, even when they scornfully dismissed Him. Two very different amazing responses stand side-by-side: Jesus' teaching amazed His hometown neighbors and their closed-minded, hard-headedness amazed Jesus.

Following a less than satisfying visit to Nazareth "[Jesus] went about among the villages teaching." Then He called His disciples two by two and sent them into the world with His message. "So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent" (Mark 6:12).

The story doesn't end with Jesus and the disciples, however, the mission has literally been placed in our hands. I am a prophet, called to speak God's condemning Law and comforting Gospel. I forth tell; that is what God's spokesman does. However, you are also a prophet for you are called to forth tell what you have received. Of what are we afraid – rejection, humiliation, derision, insensitivity, laughter? Can we expect anything different from what Ezekiel, Jesus and the disciples faced? It is not an easy job but somebody has to do it. Guess who this time? You and me!

As I was studying today's lessons I wondered why God called the people He did to be His prophets, His spokesmen. Was there some quality they all shared? Did Ezekiel, the disciples, and Paul have some common trait that made them good candidates? As I pondered this I suddenly whacked myself along the side of my head and muttered, "You simpleton! These men had one thing in common. They were all sinners. They were all unworthy. They were all lacking. God called each of them because God is gracious." Isaiah came the closest to understanding, "Woe to me! I am ruined. I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). God calls each one of us to share His Word with our neighbors for the same reason. We are sinners. So are our neighbors. God is gracious.

I wonder if it was easier or tougher for Jesus than it was for Ezekiel. Ezekiel knew the people were hard headed and stubborn. Ezekiel knew his neighbors would reject the message of God's grace. Ezekiel probably knew frustration, bitterness, and helplessness; he knew all that. However, Jesus knew something else. He knew He would die because people rejected Him. However, in that dying He would bring about their forgiveness, our forgiveness. The Savior took the world's rejection and, through His sacrificial death, reconciled all people to God. It is a tough job but somebody had to do it. And in this case only one person could do it.

Another sort of spokesman, one with possibly more authority and independence, is an ambassador. He or she speaks on behalf of the President and the nation. Paul uses this term in speaking to the Corinthians who had received faith in their Savior. They, too, as we, became spokesmen. “¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and *gave us the ministry of reconciliation*; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and *entrusting to us the message of reconciliation*. ²⁰ *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us*. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Co. 5:16-20).

So we, you and I, have a ministry of reconciliation. We stand on the shoulders of Ezekiel, Jesus, the apostles, and all who have gone before us. The job is not easy, although simple enough, and someone needs to do it. We all, every single one of us has the required credentials. Let me list them. Mentally check them off if they describe you:

- #1 We are sinners.
- #2 We were dead in our trespasses and sins.
- #3 We have been redeemed by Christ, every single one of us.
- #4 We were brought to faith by the work of the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament.
- #5 We are grateful to a loving, redeeming, saving God.
- #6 We have received a ministry of reconciliation.

Get to work! Joyfully! Excitedly! Faithfully! And Courageously!

Amen.

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Dei Gloria!