

## “There Has Been a Prophet Among Them”

Ezekiel 2:1-5 • Psalm 123 • 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 • Mark 6:1-13

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Christianity makes some truly remarkable claims. Some of these claims are so familiar to us who have been Christians for a long time that we often don't stop to pause to consider how remarkable they truly are. Today we're going to consider just one of them: the idea that God speaks to people *through other people*. God wants to *tell* us certain things, and according to the scriptures God uses several different means to do so. Sometimes there's a voice from beyond; sometimes there are angels whom God sends to deliver a message; at other times, God chooses a *particular individual* – an ordinary human, like you or me – to speak to others on behalf of God, to convey God's message to the world.

Case in point: the prophet Ezekiel, who lived about 600 years before Jesus. We don't know a great deal about his personal life – only that his father's name was Buzi, and that Ezekiel was married, and that he was a priest and came from a family of priests. That's about it. Being a priest didn't mean he *spoke* on behalf of God; it just meant that he helped to carry out the daily ritual sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem, until it was destroyed by the Babylonians, at which point Ezekiel was among a large group of Jewish exiles who were forcibly removed from their homeland and brought to Babylon.

But God wasn't done with Ezekiel. God was just *beginning*. As he “was among the exiles by the River Chebar” in what is now the country of Iraq, “the heavens were opened” and Ezekiel “saw visions of God.” “The hand of the Lord was on him.” Ezekiel beheld a majestic vision of the glory of the Lord, which is described in great detail in the first chapter of the book of Ezekiel. Then God said to Ezekiel: “O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you.” Literally, God calls him a “*son of man*.” The words make it clear that Ezekiel is *just a man*. Nothing more, nothing less. Sure, he was a priest, but at a more fundamental level, he was a *mortal human being*, just like any of the rest of us. *Nothing like this has ever happened to Ezekiel before*. He had been a priest for who-knows-how-many years by that point, and he had never experienced God *like this*. “When he spoke to me,” Ezekiel says, “a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.” Ezekiel has received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Awestruck and amazed, he continues to hear God speaking to him: “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. The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’” God is giving Ezekiel a special *job* to do. God continues: “Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.” God is calling Ezekiel to be a *prophet*.

Ezekiel was not the first prophet called by God, nor would he be the last, but this moment transformed Ezekiel's life. God has the ability to speak directly to *anyone*, but in this instance, God has

chosen to speak just to *Ezekiel*, and have *him* speak to everyone else. God wants to communicate certain messages to the community of which Ezekiel was a part – but *instead of communicating those messages directly to those people*, God chooses to use a human *messenger*. A prophet. Someone who would essentially be a *mouthpiece* for God, to convey the divine will. Perhaps God knew that Ezekiel would be more receptive to hearing the divine message than the rest of the people would be. Perhaps – could it be? – that God genuinely needed Ezekiel’s *help*? Were the other Israelites so stubborn and rebellious that the *only* way God could get their attention was by commissioning Ezekiel to this task?

God is asking Ezekiel to do something nearly impossible. God knows full well: these people are stubborn and rebellious! They are not going to be very receptive to Ezekiel’s words! Ezekiel is going to face rejection. He’s going to be ignored, harassed, mocked, ridiculed, maybe injured, or maybe worse. So God says: “You, O mortal, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns surround you and you live among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words, and do not be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house.” This is not a job for the faint of heart!

It is remarkable that God wishes to communicate with people who have *no interest* in hearing what God has to say to them. It is remarkable that God *loves us so much* that God is willing to go to *enormous means* to reach out to us. God is holding out hope: maybe – just *maybe* – *some* of these people will listen. *Some* will hear. *Some* will turn from their foolish and rebellious ways, and back to God. All of that speaks to the boundless *love* of God. Even when we are at our worst, *God still reaches to us*. God is still ready to welcome us back home. The question is simply this: are we willing to *listen*?

We are living in very challenging times, the likes of which none of us have experienced before. The bitterness in this country is at a level we have not seen in our lifetime. I am amazed and appalled by the tremendous lack of ethics and integrity demonstrated by some prominent citizens. I gasp in horror at what appears to be a never-ending stream of unpleasant and unprecedented events. A stubborn and rebellious people? Yes, we are that. We are that *for sure*. And I wonder: *where are the prophets*? Where are the people of faith and good conscience who are willing to speak out publicly on behalf of God? *Where are the people like Ezekiel*, the people who would be willing to risk life and limb to proclaim an unpopular but sobering message about the kind of people God truly wishes us to be? I look around in desperation. *Where are the prophets*? And then I remember: some of them have been silenced. Beth Moore, to name just one; a popular evangelical Christian and Bible teacher who had the audacity to speak out against the injustice and the sexism and the Christian nationalism that was taking over her beloved denomination. What happened when she did that? She was shunned, ostracized, and made to feel like a pariah, no longer welcome in what had once been her church home. *This is what can happen to prophets*. The word from God they are boldly proclaiming is deemed “too radical” or “too dangerous” or “too offensive” or “too heretical.” They are no longer welcome in their own hometown.

If you want to know more about Beth Moore’s story, I would encourage you to pick up her memoir, *All My Knotted-Up Life*, just published last year. Too many people cave in to injustice; too many Christians compromise their values to stay in their positions of power and influence. Beth Moore wasn’t willing to do either of those, and she paid the price. Our world desperately needs people with the kind of *courage* and *integrity* that Beth Moore has displayed. The courage and integrity of a *prophet*.

And if you want to know the rest of *Ezekiel’s* story, well, there’s *another* book you can read!

But for now, let's turn to Jesus, the prophet *par excellence*. In today's reading, Jesus comes to Nazareth, where he grew up. On the Sabbath he teaches in the synagogue, but the congregation isn't very receptive to what he has to say. They were living their lives the way they wanted to; they didn't feel any need to change anything; and they couldn't perceive the *truth* of Jesus's words. Perhaps they had so many memories of him growing up that they were unable or unwilling to recognize that – like Ezekiel – he has now been endowed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. They could only see a boy, now grown up, saying things that were making them uncomfortable. Given the choice between changing their ways and their perceptions of him, on the one hand, or dismissing him and living their life the way they always had, they chose the latter. “Prophets are not without honor,” he said to them, “except in their hometown and among their own kin and in their own house.” And “he was amazed at their unbelief.”

It's a tough choice, isn't it? When someone comes along and encourages or invites you to a more holy or a more faithful or a more honest life, and you're comfortable the way you are, and you find yourself at a crossroads: do you stick with what is familiar and comfortable, or do you engage in the hard work of *change*? If you stick with what is familiar and comfortable, you're going to have to dismiss (or silence) the voice that is calling you to change. This is why some people leave churches; the journey they are being asked to embark upon is too challenging for them. It's also why some pastors who push too hard get run out of town. I once knew a pastor who had served a church in Arkansas in the 1970s. Not long after his arrival he discovered that three members of the Session – the church's governing board – were members of the Ku Klux Klan. He knew he had a very difficult choice to make. He could (a) live with it and not make any waves, not challenge the racist views of some of the most prominent members of that church; or (b) speak out with boldness and conviction against racist attitudes, and face the inevitable backlash that would surely come; or (c) retreat and find another church to serve. He had a wife and young children. He knew he was absolutely not willing to choose option (a). He wanted to choose option (b), but concern for the well-being of his family propelled him to choose option (c). He felt regret about that, but he also knew the cards were stacked decisively against him and it was a battle he surely would have lost, perhaps at great cost to his family. Sometimes ... we have to pick our battles.

Jesus wasn't encumbered by any worries like that. He didn't care who he offended. In the tradition of all the faithful prophets of Israel's past – people like Ezekiel – he did the job God gave him to do, boldly and fearlessly. He didn't have much success in Nazareth, but that didn't deter him. “He went about among the villages teaching.” He even commissioned his twelve disciples to go out in pairs, with a measure of his own spiritual power and authority, to carry out ministry in his name. They surely had concerns about this, but in the end they did as Jesus bid: “they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.”

The people those disciples encountered also had a choice to make. Would they continue living their familiar, comfortable lives, or would they listen to these disciples of Jesus and be willing to change their ways? Could they perceive the spiritual *truth* and *power* in the words those disciples spoke?

That's really the question, isn't it? *How do you know when you're in the presence of a prophet?* How do you know when someone like *Ezekiel* or one of *the twelve* are in your midst? How do you *know* when you should listen to the challenging word that is being spoken? How do you know the *truth* when someone claims to speak on behalf of *God*? How do you *know* when it's really *the word of the Lord*?

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