

Ezekiel was a prophet. Prophets in biblical times were individuals whom God selected to deliver messages to the people. Prophets were not “fortune tellers”. They acted and spoke on behalf of God, and very often what they had to say was not what people wanted to hear. Ezekiel spoke his prophetic oracles over a period of about thirty years (593 B.C. to 563 B.C.). The time period in which Ezekiel prophesied was pivotal in the history of Judah. God’s people had strayed away from God and were in God’s words, “Rebellious.” In other words, they did their own thing with little or no regard for God. As a result of their rebellion and chasing after other gods, the people of Judah faced punishment, and in the punishment was exile to the land of Babylon. The Babylonians, under the rule of King Neb, invaded the land of Judah and beginning in 597 B.C., began the process of taking the people of Judah into exile. Ezekiel was one of the first ones to be taken captive and it is in that setting that Ezekiel ministered and prophesied. Needless to say, times were not good.

So who was this Ezekiel guy anyway? He was just an ordinary person from a priestly family who God happened to call out of the clear blue. Ezekiel, like all the other prophets, had no formal training in how to be a “prophet”. There wasn’t a school for prophecy where one could go and learn the nuances of being a prophet. The local community college didn’t even have a continuing education course in prophecy! Here is the preparation for being a prophet – God calls the prophet and says, “Go here to these people and tell them this.” That is it. There, in a nutshell, is what God said to Ezekiel. But just because it is so good, I want to read to you the formal commissioning of Ezekiel. This is from the second chapter of Ezekiel:

“God said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. 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. The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they shall know that there has been a prophet among them. And 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

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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.”

Now I don't know about you, but I think after receiving those marching orders I would be a little skeptical and depressed. As many of you are well aware, in the United Methodist church we have an itinerant system when it comes to placing clergy in the various churches. Here is how it works. The Bishop, along with the District Superintendents, make up what is called the Cabinet. This group meets throughout the year and is charged with placing clergy in churches across our Conference. It is a much more collaborative system than it used to be. District superintendents are in conversation throughout the year with their pastors and churches. We still go where we are sent and don't really have a whole lot of say in where we go, but we do feel a part of the process and that is a good thing.

I have served three different appointments so far – Alliance UMC in Fort Worth as an associate pastor, FUMC Dawson and Tehuacana, and now here at Mexia. Each time the D.S. called and told me about the churches before asking if I would be willing to go. In addition to sharing characteristics and facts about the church, the D.S. would tell me what the church wanted in a pastor. Usually that means everything! Be young, experienced, great preacher, great at pastoral care, superior administrator, etc. Churches don't really ask for much out of their pastors – just perfection in every way! I'm kidding and not kidding at the same time. We pastors are guilty of the same thing. We want the perfect church. When the D.S. calls we want him or her to say something like this: “We want to send you to First UMC U.S.A. It is a growing, dynamic church with lots of young families and activities for all ages. They really love each other at First UMC U.S.A. Everyone, I mean everyone, gets along and there is no conflict. They are stable financially and at the end of the year they have so much money left over they have to call a meeting to figure out what to do with it. They are receptive to the gospel and will do just about whatever you want to do. What do you think?” “I think you're crazy, but if that place exists, like Isaiah, my answer is, ‘Here am I Lord. Send me!’”

I wonder what the average pastor would say if his or her D.S. called and said, “We have an opportunity for you. (Opportunity is a code word for an incredible challenge against all odds!) We want you to go to First UMC

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Despair. It's not all that appealing of a place. The building is falling apart. The members who are left don't really get along and besides that could care less about the gospel. The town itself is not safe and the schools are horrendous. In Despair there is not much to do so most of the people in the town and church will make up all kinds of stuff to talk about – including you. We think you are the perfect person for this church! We want you to go to Despair and share the good news. It doesn't matter if they respond to you or not. Just preach the good news and let the chips fall where they may.”

I realize that sounds a little far-fetched, but isn't that what God said to most of the prophets, including Ezekiel? In effect, God's marching orders for Ezekiel were: “I'm sending you to a bunch of rebellious morons, but don't be afraid of them. Don't be afraid of what they say to you or say about you or even how they look at you. You are speaking on my behalf and that is all that matters.”

Now God didn't just turn Ezekiel loose to say whatever Ezekiel wanted to say. A prophet, a true prophet, speaks a word from God and not from himself. This is where the scroll comes into play. God gave Ezekiel a scroll to eat. This was symbolic of what was happening – God was literally placing his words into Ezekiel.

We have talked a lot lately about inviting others to church and sharing our faith more openly. Walt raised a good question a couple of Sundays ago when he asked us, “What are we inviting them to when we invite people to our church?” That's a great question. If our sole intention is to make a few more buddies and hang out, then we have missed the boat. However, if our intention is to invite them to hear the good news of God's grace, then we are right on track. My question for you today is how much of God's Word is in your heart? Have you been eating the Word of God? Now I'm not suggesting that we take a big chunk out of our N.I.V. study bible as if it were a ham sandwich, but what I am suggesting is that we spend more time in God's Word, both individually and in small groups. The Bible is not just a book of obscure names and outdated stories. It is God's revelation to us. Through the Bible, God reveals God's self to us and shares with us what it is like to live in relationship not only with him, but with others as well. What is inside of you today?

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Ezekiel said that the scroll tasted as sweet as honey. If eating a scroll sounds a little bit odd, get used to it because Ezekiel was a little bit odd. I have never been big on the game of charades. In fact, charades drives me up the wall. I'm really not an expressive person so I come by it honestly. Others, however, enjoy playing a game of charades. I think Ezekiel would have been good at the game of charades because on more than one occasion he acted out what would happen to the people if they didn't return to God. Once he took a brick and on the brick he built a model of the city of Jerusalem, complete with a siege wall. Up against the siege wall he built a ramp and set up camps all around it. For those of you who grew up playing G.I. Joe, this is right up your alley. Only in Ezekiel's little game the outcome is not all that favorable for Jerusalem. Just imagine what it would have been like to have been a resident of Jerusalem and to see one of your own people acting out the city's demise.

As if that wasn't enough, listen to the next assignment God assigned Ezekiel. God wanted him to lie on his left side for 390 days. This was a way of Ezekiel bearing the punishment symbolically for Israel. The 390 days represented the years of Israel's punishment. Then God had him lie down for 40 days to represent the 40 years of Judah's punishment. I imagine Ezekiel got some strange looks. God was essentially asking Ezekiel to make a complete fool out of himself to speak on behalf of God. How many of us would have done what God asked Ezekiel to do? I think I would have to say to God, "Thanks, but no thanks. Could you find someone else to lie on his side for 390 days? Could you find someone else to play this twisted game of G.I. Joe?"

The more I read the book of Ezekiel the more I am convinced that God not only has a sense of humor, but actually likes to mix things up and speaks to us in unconventional ways through unconventional people. We can learn a lot from Ezekiel. If anything we learn that God speaks in different ways through different people and what might connect one person to Christ might not connect another. We will be starting a new worship service in the future. It will be different than this worship service but it will be a worship service nonetheless. The idea behind this service is to reach people who are not here right now and provide a different worship atmosphere. Yes, it might be the kind of service that speaks to those who are already here, but that is not the sole intent. Nor is the intent to relieve overcrowding in this service. We have plenty of room to grow at the 10:30 a.m. service. I've already said it will be a different service and unfortunately

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for some of us, different means wrong. If it's not my preference then it must be wrong. If I've learned one thing from being the pastor of different churches, it is that God speaks in many different ways through many different people. There is not a cookie cutter approach to faith. Faith in Christ comes in all shapes and sizes.

I once heard someone give a devotional and it was, in my humble opinion, terrible. There was not one ounce of hope and grace throughout the whole talk. Imagine someone hitting you with a sledge hammer in the chest for about fifteen minutes and you will have an idea what it was like. I did my best but I couldn't follow the guy, and when I did understand what he was saying I disagreed. I thought about it later in the week and came to the conclusion that maybe, just maybe, that devotional wasn't for me, and that perhaps God was trying to speak to someone else who needed to hear what was said. Maybe the whole point of the devotional for me was that my way is not the only way and sometimes not even the best way.

Tony Campolo and his wife were returning from New Zealand after a preaching mission and stopped in Honolulu to take a break from the long trip. They got off the plane with plans to catch another plane to Los Angeles five hours later. In the meantime, they headed into the city and took a walk along Waikiki Beach. As they strolled along, they came upon a very strange looking man standing with a Bible in one hand and waving his finger at every passerby with the other. He was barefoot and wearing a dirty T-shirt and tattered trousers. To everyone who passed by he pronounced the judgment of God on those who would not accept Christ.

As Tony passed him he said to his wife: "It's guys like that who are an embarrassment to the Kingdom of God. People look at wierdos like that and get turned off to the gospel. Guys like that leave me a bit disgusted."

An hour or so later they were headed back to catch the bus to the airport, and they came upon the same man. Much to Tony's surprise, there were two very normal-looking, properly dressed men standing with him. He had his arms around their shoulders, and as Tony passed by he could hear that they were saying a prayer accepting God's grace found in Jesus. Tony's wife looked at him simply and said, "Well? How many people did you lead to Jesus today?"