

JULY 2021 DEVOTIONS

Sunday, July 4, 2021

Ezekiel 2:1-5 (NRSV) - *Recognizing a Prophet*

He 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 (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

Prophets speak and act on God's behalf. Prophecy can be traced back to Deuteronomy when the Israelites felt overwhelmed by God speaking directly to them, and requested that Moses act as a mediator. God agreed to their request, and Moses revealed whatever God spoke. Later in Deuteronomy, God spoke again of raising another prophet like Moses - Ezekiel, as revealed in the scripture for today's devotion.

Faithful prophets like Moses, Ezekiel and others that follow demonstrated the potential for humans to be a channel for God's word. Jesus revealed the full realization of human potential. He remained sinless through his oneness of will and obedient, the potential open to all of humankind. Ezekiel communicated for God not only through words, but actions as well. In this Scripture, Ezekiel revealed God's anger over the Israelites rebellion and the threat of God's judgment. Through prophecy we learn just how important language is between the divine and humanity, and not to allow it to be devalued within our culture.

How can we know we've encountered a prophet? Ezekiel taught that we will know *there has been a prophet among them*. Deuteronomy also taught that prophecy will be determined by when what has been predicted occurs or is proven true, but of course that's in the future. What about the here and now? Jeremiah described false prophets as those who speak in words that are pleasant or put people at ease only to be accepted, perhaps popular

among others. (Perhaps too good to be true?!) Ezekiel spoke words that were neither easy to hear nor was he popular. The people knew he was a prophet when he said *Thus says the Lord* despite their resistance and rebellion. Perhaps the greater the cost to the messenger, the more likely they are to be a prophet.

Questions to Ponder

- Who would you consider to be a prophet at this time? How did you recognize that? What words do they speak?

Prayer

O God us give ears to hear your messengers, hearts and minds to understand your words that are spoken. Amen.

Sunday, July 11, 2021

Amos 7:7-15 (NRSV) - *God's Ultimate Power*

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "*See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.*" Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "*Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'*" And Amaziah said to Amos, "*O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.*" Then Amos answered Amaziah, "*I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'*"

Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel said that a significant part of a prophet's work was to remind rulers that their power was not unlimited. Ultimate power belongs to God. The words spoken by Amos, '*Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land,*' would be considered an act of treason.

Amos came before the king not of his own authority, rather he was been sent to speak God's Word. He brought a plumb line into the midst of Israel, a measure to determine whether or not the people were truthful. Israel fooled other nations into believing they were sinless. God has wondered if they have fooled themselves as well, even though they have neglected and trampled down the poor and needy, and have restricted the meaning of sin in unscrupulous ways - perhaps watered-down, determined to be insignificant,....?

The priest Amaziah came before King Jeroboam to discredit Amos, and to undermine his prophetic words. He warned the king that this herdsman, not a prophet, was conspiring against both the king's sovereignty and the security of Israel. However, Amos would not be stopped from speaking God's words and rejects any claim to authority beyond God's Word. Neither the state (King Jeroboam) or religious authority (Amaziah) would determine who will speak for God, nor can they silence a prophet because that is only determined by God.

Questions to Ponder

- Do you recognize when the meaning of sin has been restricted?
- Can you name particular harmful behaviors and misdeeds that are often overlooked, no longer considered sinful?

Prayer

God help us to know that ultimate authority comes from you only. Help us to discern and listen the prophets of our day. Amen.

Sunday, July 18, 2021

Jeremiah 23:1-6 (NRSV) - *Hope Beyond Our Failures*

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

When scripture begins with the word "woe," we often think an accusation and punishment for a wrongdoing will soon follow. This text concluded the word of judgment against the kings of Judah, but also included the promise of redemption for the people of God. The kings have forgotten their responsibility for the welfare of their people. They have failed to assume their role as a shepherd to protect and nurture their flock, and this failure has resulted in exile.

Most of us have never, nor will we ever possess the power of a king or ruler, yet we all possess some kind of power. Whether in our home, at work, or in our communities, we possess some power over others. Hopefully that power is exercised with compassion and justice for those involved. Ultimately this scripture is about how God's power is exercised. God's power far surpasses any power that exercised by humans. God is the shepherd and will gather humanity together to protect and nurture them. God will restore what has been broken in Creation for the people of God.

A new leader is coming who will lead in compassionate ways that create a community without fear. "The righteous Branch will be king,...and will

execute justice and righteousness in the land.” The promise for a messiah has been given - hope beyond human failure, beyond God’s judgment, beyond exile for all of God’s people. How do we live in expectation of this hope? We receive this gift knowing that it changes how we perceive our reality. No longer are we bound to fears for an uncertain future. We acknowledge the power in this promise and share it with others in our speech and actions. We prepare to receive the shepherd, the messiah, by living as God desires as best as we can at this time and place. And as we prepare, we are mindful that it is God who has the power to raise this righteous Branch, not us. We cling to God’s promise, and seek to be faithful in our work for justice and peace for all of God’s people.

Questions to Ponder

- Am I compassionate with the power I may possess with others at home, work, in my community?
- How am I faithful in working for justice and peace for all of God’s people?

Prayer

God, our Shepherd. Your promises are real and true. Thank you as you lead us in love and hope beyond our failures, beyond your judgement. Amen.

Sunday, July 25, 2021

2 Kings 4:42-44 (NRSV) - *God's Abundant Blessings*

A man came from Ba'al-shal'ishah, bringing the man of God bread of the first fruits, twenty loaves of barley, and fresh ears of grain in his sack. And Eli'sha said, "Give to the men, that they may eat." But his servant said, "How am I to set this before a hundred men?" So he repeated, "Give them to the men, that they may eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" So he set it before them. And they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

Elisha reminded us that there is suffering and need in the world, and that God's abundance is beyond our realization. The prophet Elisha began his work in the midst of war between Syria and Israel. Uncertainty was constant, and many lived in fear. Food was scarce, but the man of Ba' al-shal'ishah - Elijah, demonstrated faithfulness and generosity. Elisha chose not to receive the gift of bread for himself, rather he chose to give it directly to the people. His servant was doubtful that there was enough to feed everyone. Remember the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000? God provided more than enough with leftovers. The abundance of God's blessings were made known in the midst of great need, proof that God works beyond our expectations.

We are challenged in the midst of great need to be generous, and have a vision of how to provide for that need. We budget our resources and time according to what we perceive to be limitations. We are prudent and tend to only spend what we can afford before we put our vision into action. We might not look toward Elisha as advisor for our vision. His advice is likely to be outside of what we believe we can accomplish.

Yet, Elisha was also prudent. He took stock of his resources, and instructed his servant to feed the 20 loaves of bread to the 100 people. Elisha also remembered that God was present and understood that as a resource to respond to the needs the people.

We too must reach beyond our normal "common sense" resources. Keep the needs of people in the forefront (food, clean water, clothing, affordable housing, accessible to medical care) and look for God in the

midst. God's abundant blessings are there, and may bring more before us more than we could ever imagine.

Questions to Ponder

- How do I consider my available resources to meet the suffering and needs in the world?
- Do I look for God in the midst to receive additional resources never considered before?

Prayer

Gracious God. We know there are those who are suffering and in the need in the world. Help us to create a vision to share our resources and to recognize your abundant blessings for those suffering and in need as well. Amen.

