

7 Pentecost, Proper 9. Yr. B

July 6, 2018

Ez. 2:1-5, 2 Cor. 12:22-10; Mark 6:1-13

I think I just said last week, that it's unusual for the second reading to "match" the themes of the 1st and 3rd, but today we have an example of just that. All three of the readings have to do with prophecy and whether it's heard or rejected. Another way of putting it is that these readings ask perennial questions: where does authority come from? Who has credibility? How do we know who's telling the truth? How do we know who to believe and, by extension, follow?

In the Ezekiel reading, we're coming in at the second chapter. Ezekiel is with the Israelites in exile in Babylon. They were taken there after some disastrous political decisions taken by their king, which resulted in the destruction of the temple, the county, the leadership. In fact, the entire nation. The exiles have some central questions: Where is God? Is the god of Babylonians more powerful than our God? Does God even know how to find us since we are away from our land? The book begins with Ezekiel having a pretty fantastic vision: strong winds, flashing fire, 4-faced beasts, the glory of God seated on the heavenly throne. And then, here in this 2nd chapter, he hears the voice of God, telling him to stand up and to go to the Israelites with God's words on his lips. It sounds like God isn't all that sure that the people will listen, even when Ezekiel says "Thus says the Lord," because God tells him that whether they listen or not, he's to go and speak to them. If he does, and they repent, fine. If he does and they DON'T repent, it's not Ezekiel's problem. If he doesn't go and speak to them, however, then their lack of repentance will fall on his head. The content of his message is to call them back to God's ways – to repent of their sins.

A word about prophets in general. You may recall that they didn't so much predict the future as to name the truth about how the people were living and to remind them of the consequences of their ways of life. The prophets were men who were haunted by the sin and wrong-doing that set up obstacles to God's will. One way to think of them was that they had a foot in both worlds. They had had a direct experience of God, so they had a foot in the heavenly realm, but they were also living among and loving their people. And, from the beginning, there were false prophets and thus a central question: HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO TELL THE TRUE PROPHETS FROM THE FALSE ONES? One might think that one way would be the power of the person's conviction, but that's certainly not fool-proof. One commentator wrote about a student who, he said, completely poisoned one of his classes. It was a fellow who was convinced that he had a hot line to God and who would brook no discussion or opposition. But that would probably be the case with a true prophet as well, so, how to tell? One constant in the literature is that, if what the prophet said was going to happen, did indeed happen, he (and I think they were mostly "hes") then he was a true prophet. You'll immediately see the problem here, however, because this is always hindsight. Another way to tell is whether the prophecy is costing the person anything or if they are speaking to enhance their own comfort, prestige or power. The latter, of course, being a sign of untrustworthiness. Yet a third way is whether what the prophet is saying is in accord with the larger tradition.

So, while most of this rests on the shoulders of the would-be prophet, to speak the truth as God has given him to speak, part of it also rests on the shoulders of the listeners, who must judge the credibility of the speaker. One aphorism says that no one should pay attention to a man delivering a lecture or a sermon on his “philosophy of life” until he knows exactly how he treats his wife, his children, his neighbors, his friends, his subordinates, and his enemies. So that the actions, the life of the speaker either undercut or support his claims to be speaking on behalf of God.

Given that we’re in the middle of summer and the swimming season, here’s another story. A young lady was soaking up the sun on the beach when a little boy came up to her and asked her, “Do you believe in God?” “Why, yes, I do,” she responded. Then he said, “Do you go to church every Sunday?” Again the answer was yes. Then the next question, “Do you read your Bible and pray?” And again she said, “Yes.” The little fellow sighed with obvious relief and said, “Will you watch my quarter while I go in swimming?”

Paul’s facing the same kind of credibility/authority problem in Corinth. A little context is again helpful. Paul has left Corinth, but some “super-apostles” have come in behind him, preaching a different message, probably that people need to become Jews before they can become Christians. Paul’s worried that they are undermining his ministry – this is a kind of anticipation of rejection. From the letter, we can understand that Paul’s competitors are saying that he’s too weak and vacillating and, besides, he hasn’t had any spiritual experiences that would give him credibility and bolster his authority. Paul is goaded into defending himself in this answer, because it becomes apparent that the person who was caught up to the 3rd heaven was Paul himself. You get the sense that he hated to be forced to make this comparison. And then he tells them that the measure of his ministry isn’t whether he was caught up to some upper heaven or not, but it’s rather the suffering that he’s endured – the beatings, hunger and thirst, the shipwrecks and this mysterious thorn he suffers. If you think it’s all about power and glory, you’re wrong, is the message: it’s about being used in spite of your weakness, because this ministry is God’s doing, it’s the power of Christ that’s enabling Paul.

And then there’s Mark’s story of Jesus coming back to his hometown. A couple of chapters before this, Mark tells us that Jesus’ family has rejected him – you’ll remember that they came to get him and take him home because they thought he was out of his mind. And now there’s this rejection from the people he lived with for 30 years. The townspeople have a number of responses. One gets the feeling that they’ve heard what Jesus has done – maybe about calming the sea, or maybe about Jairus’s daughter. One wonders what their expectations were. At least initially, it seems like there was a positive response – the text says that they were astounded – WOW! Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom? What deeds of power! But then, a note of caution: wait a minute, we know this guy. He’s a carpenter, we know his family. And now they’re offended. Why that reaction, do you think? One Roman, writing about the Christian movement and about Jesus, was disbelieving, not about the virgin birth, or about God becoming a man, but because Jesus was from a lower class. Surely not! Other commentators have other suggestions: in that society, social mobility would have been unheard of – rather like the class argument: he’s getting above himself. And in that honor and shame society, to claim honor for yourself meant that someone else would have to “lose” some

status. Or maybe it's just that they knew him "when." Some speculate that the fact that they call him "Mary's son" and not Joseph's, means that there's some hint of illegitimacy about his birth. Or maybe they were just cautious because they'd known of false messiahs. Whatever it was, they weren't going there. It's interesting to note that Jesus doesn't try to persuade them or argue with them, or prove to them that he has the authority he's claiming. The text says, interestingly, and rather inconsistently, that "he could do no deeds of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them." One would think that would have made a difference, but it didn't seem to. He just metaphorically shook the dust from his sandals and went to other villages. Thinking about their reaction and their expectations, one commentator pointed out how really hard it is for people to overcome social conventions, on the one hand – so they (and we) would be primed not to go with something that turned everything upside down. The other thing that came to mind when I was writing this was something that came out of a Bjorklunden seminar about how our minds pre-sort what we can see, what we can take in. Someone did any experiment in which they took some college age kids and gave them a basketball; they were supposed to pass it back and forth, counting the number of bounces. In the middle of this, someone dressed like a gorilla walked right through the middle of the group – and no one saw it. What are we primed to see; what do we miss because of that.

A final thought here. You'll all know about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who pushed back against the Nazis. Like the prophets we're talking about, he was shouting his warnings about what was going on under Hitler. In his case, he came from an upper class family. He understood what was going on and saw through the lies that were being perpetrated: I just saw a Goebbels quote "If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State." Bonhoeffer spoke the truth; first he was forbidden to preach; then he was forbidden to publish. Eventually, he was imprisoned and he was hanged just days before the end of the war. He saw through the pseudo authority of the Nazis and spoke the truth. But there's something else interesting in this. I read that the Nazi judge who had to pronounce the death sentence was so convinced that Bonhoeffer was a traitor; he so rejected Bonhoeffer's Christian message, he so bought into the Nazi lie that he moved heaven and earth to get to the prison to pronounce sentence. Because the war was ending, he had to take a train that only ran part way and then a car and finally a bicycle, but he was determined that Bonhoeffer should die. A true prophet killed in the end by someone who had bought into the lies of one of history's worst false prophets.

The message for us today? The same as it was in the past, even in ancient times. Use your moral compass, your knowledge of right and wrong, your understanding of Christianity and don't be fooled into mistaking false prophets for true. Amen.