

Sermon for July 4, 2021

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“Mortal I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels... they have transgressed against me... They are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them.”

I can't imagine Ezekiel's response was “Yay God! I can't wait.”

God goes on to state that the people are likely to refuse to hear what Ezekiel has been sent to say, for they are a rebellious house. Yet even knowing the prophet is likely to be refused, he is still sent, for God says “whether they hear or refuse to hear, they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.”

The Prophets call is not grounded in the readiness of a people, an assumption of positive reception, or the expectation of successful hearing. Rather God sends Ezekiel because God is still at work.

Imagine the job description: Go to a stubborn, impudent nation of rebels and transgressors to speak a word that is likely to be unheard.

God calls.

Today's Gospel story has a similar ring to it. Jesus has come to his hometown and begun to teach. He is met with questions about his authority, doubts about his identity. People are offended by his teaching. Even he could not do deeds of power there, amazed at their unbelief.

It is at this moment that he calls the twelve and sends them out. Even in his sending he tells them to expect that there will be places they are not welcome, times that people will refuse to hear what they have to say. Jesus sending is not grounded in the readiness of a people, an assumption of positive reception, or the expectation of successful hearing. Jesus still sends because God is at work.

There is that job description again: Go to a people who refuse even Jesus himself, who are not likely to welcome you and will likely refuse to hear what you have to say.

God calls.

If these are examples of God's calling and sending in scripture, what might it mean for us, as the church, God's sent people, today? How often do we expect to be sent only to a people who are ready, assuming only positive reception and success in being heard? Would we accept the job God lays out in scripture today? Go dwell amidst rebels and transgressors, the stubborn and impudent, the unwelcoming and unable to receive. Go not because you will be well liked or overtly successful but because God is at work and has sent you.

How are we to be this sent people? Jesus gives the disciples he sends three guiding words that I think remain relevant to us today:

1. Go Two by Two
2. Do not Count on what you bring but rather on what God provides
3. Shake off the Dust

First, Jesus does not send out individuals, he sends forth teams, partners to do the work of God together. Even back to the beginning of creation God has recognized it is not good for us to be alone. We are given the gift of one another. Two by two the disciples go forth, and if they are not welcomed they are still never alone; if they are turned away they still have one another to turn towards; if they are unheard they still have one another to listen to. We are not meant to do this work alone. We need this community, our partnerships, to do God's work.

Second, Do not count on what you bring but rather depend on what God will provide. Jesus orders his disciples to take nothing for their journey except a staff. They bring no food, no bag for storage, no money – not even a back up tunic. They are completely vulnerable and dependent on others and what God will provide. For many of us that sounds like a scary way to travel. But how does our ministry, our work change, when we recognize our dependence on God and the community? We must recognize ourselves as receivers to be successful at sharing.

Many of you know that this call to Pastoral ministry is new for me in many ways. I come from a lifelong career in programming – as a teacher you had a lesson plan, as a youth director you went armed with activities, games and supplies. One of my deepest learnings has been to NOT count on what I bring but rather depend on what God will provide. One of my first pastoral care calls, I went to the hospital complete with “lesson plan” – hopeful scripture to read, prayer for healing to say, shawl for comfort – but as I came striding into the room it was rapidly apparent – my plan was not God's call. As I found myself standing with a grieving family alongside their beloved who had just died, all I could do was depend on what God would provide. Bring nothing except a recognition of your dependence on God.

Third, Shake off the Dust. This past week our new little puppy discovered the joy of digging. His favorite new activity is to dig a hole in the dry dirt, large enough to crawl into and roll about. You can imagine what this thick furred little creature looks like when he emerges from such a hole. And what does he do – he shakes. He shakes in the breezeway, he shakes in the kitchen, he shakes on the couch and the dust flies, leaving a trail behind him as he keeps moving. Jesus anticipates that the disciples will have bad experiences. He advises that if they are not welcomed or someone refuses to hear, leave and shake off the dust before they move on. We have a tendency to get buried in the dirt – to let the negative cling to us and overshadow the positive work. Did you know that scientific studies show that for most individuals it takes 7 positives to overcome 1 negative? Jesus urges the disciples to not be weighted down but metaphorically to shake it off and keep moving.

God calls. But first God came – to us – a stubborn and impudent people of transgressors and rebels, who often refuse to listen and fail to welcome as we should. “For God so loved the world that God sent God's only Son.” We give thanks that God continues to come – gives us the gift of “two by two”, provides what we cannot supply on our own, and strengthens us to shake off the dust and be sent once again to a world that might not be ready, where we may not be well received or successfully heard – but where God is still at work in great love. Mortal I am sending you.