

“Living Illustrations”

Introduction: Charades is a party game we probably all have played at one time or another. Its exaggerated gestures and crazy facial expressions can be great fun as the one who is “it” tries to lead an audience or team to guess what he or she is depicting without the use of words. I would imagine, however, that Ezekiel didn’t consider great fun the wordless gestures that God had instructed him to portray. Every act, every scene, was deadly serious as God sought to communicate to his people, living in exile in Babylon in the 6th c. B.C., the seriousness and the consequences of their rebellion against him.

The game of charades that God had instructed Ezekiel to play was more like a three-act tragedy. Ezekiel had been confined by God to his little house, most likely to learn that he was to only speak what and when God directed him to. Each act that God called him to portray is identified by God’s command that Ezekiel “take” some object to be used as a prop and then act out a scene of judgment for curious onlookers to observe and ponder. We’ll look at each of these acts, consider what they mean, and then ask how they might be communicating God’s word of warning, and God’s heart, to us today.

I. The Three Acts – “Take”

A. In act one (4:1-8), God instructs Ezekiel to *take* a block of clay and portray what would be the upcoming two-year siege of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army. The current group of exiles had been taken in the first siege, five years earlier. False prophets had been running around trying to convince the exiles that this was all going to be over soon, but the rebellious behavior of the exiles had not changed, and neither had that of their fellow-Israelites who had been left back in Jerusalem. The exile was a judgment from God and that judgment was not finished yet. Darker days were still ahead (cf. 2 Kings 24-25).

Illustration: As one writer puts it, God’s people in exile were like the beleaguered cowboys in an old Western movie who thought, when they heard the bugle sound, that they were going to be rescued by the cavalry, only to discover that the cavalry would be fighting on the side of the Indians the cowboys had been dispossessing!

So, at God’s direction, Ezekiel sketched out the city of Jerusalem on this clay, and then modeled with the leftover pieces the various siege works that would be laid up against this walled city. Ezekiel was then to take an iron pan and use it to depict a wall that had come between God and his people. Finally, he was to lie on his left side, and then his right, each day representing a year of the disobedience of the people of Israel. It’s not altogether certain what the number of years represents. At the very least, the total of 430 is significant because it was the number of years God’s people had been enslaved in Egypt (Ex. 12:40), and so it was a number that would have reminded the exiles of bondage, captivity, and servitude to others while in a foreign land. In round numbers, 390 also could have stood for the number of years the northern kingdom of Israel had been in rebellion against God’s ways, from the division of the kingdom to the return from exile (931 – 529 B.C.), while 40 could represent either the length of the exile of the southern kingdom of Judah, or the generation that wandered in the wilderness.

It needs to be mentioned that all of this does not imply that Ezekiel lay on his side 24/7 for over a year, any more than saying, “our pastor preached on Ezekiel for three months” would imply a 90-day non-stop sermon! As we learn in the next act, Ezekiel would have been up and around, cooking, eating, and

preaching during that time. Perhaps this would have been a daily enactment, or a morning and afternoon showing? Whatever the case, this first act was to represent the siege of Jerusalem to come.

B. The cooking and eating aspect is seen in the second act (4:9-17). Here, Ezekiel was instructed to *take* a number of grains with which he was to bake bread, and, along with some water, eat it each day of his siege act. The punch here was that the amount of bread and water Ezekiel was told he could eat was extremely meagre, barely enough to keep one alive. This would represent the horrible suffering and starvation that accompanied a long siege, as well as to only have available an “unclean” form of fuel for cooking. This kind of famine is predicted in the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 28 (vv. 52-57) which, along with Lev. 26, records the outcomes of persistent disobedience to the ways of the Lord. In the case of famine, the desperation of the hungry would even lead to the horror of family cannibalism.

C. The last act of this three-act tragedy, flowing from the siege and the suffering of the first two acts, depicts the final destruction of Jerusalem and the fate of its people (5:1-4). Here, God instructs Ezekiel to *take* a sharp sword and use it as a razor to shave his head and beard. When the days of the siege were over what Ezekiel had cut was to be divided into thirds. This was to symbolize what would happen to Jerusalem’s population when the city finally fell to its attackers (586 B.C.). A little bit later in the chapter, God provides the meaning: A third would die from disease, a third from the swords of the invaders, and a third would be scattered into exile.

Such is the three-act tragedy that Ezekiel acted out over the course of a year plus, in response to the persistent, and continuing, rebellion of God’s people Israel. As we learned last week, the emphasis is on the bad news that comes before the good news. What are we to do with it? How can we, as Paul puts it to the church in Corinth, learn from the warnings we find in Israel’s history? [1 Cor. 10:1-12]

II. Warnings from Israel’s History

A. Let’s begin, first of all, by considering the essence of their rebellion. It is summed up by God after Ezekiel had received all his acting instructions, beginning in 5:5 – “This is Jerusalem, which I have set in the center of the nations . . . yet in her wickedness she has rebelled against my laws and decrees more than the nations and countries around her.” *In the center of the nations* is the key phrase here. Formed as descendants of Abraham into a nation that was called by God to be a blessing to all peoples of the earth, rescued from slavery in Egypt by God to be a nation that would be a “light to the nations,” God’s people Israel were to be like a good solid hub that radiates out to the spokes and the wheel the goodness and grace and glory of the LORD to the peoples in whose midst they were living. Sadly, God’s people, by rebelling against him, had instead led those peoples further into the darkness. They had failed to fulfill his purpose for them.

Of course, it would be easy to point our finger at “horrible, rebellious Israel.” And yet the church, which has assumed the role of the hub, as a chosen people, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (1 Pe. 2:9), would do well to allow this text to lead us to examine our own house. Consider John who, after receiving an Ezekiel-style vision of the glory of the risen Christ, addressed the various ways that the churches of his day had gone astray from Christ’s purpose for their witness (Rev. 1:9-3:22). God takes his call on the church to shine the light of Christ on those around us just as seriously as he took it on Israel.

I appreciate the way Frank Griswold, the former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church USA, and a summer, NH neighbor of ours, puts our call in his recent book, *Tracking Down the Holy Spirit*. He writes,

“Our lifelong task is seeking to know God’s desire for us and our full flourishing, and how we are meant to participate in God’s continuing work of healing and reconciliation in this fragile and wounded world.” This call is true of us as individuals, and also as the church. Are we shining the light of Christ toward the goal of healing and reconciliation in these troubling times in which we live? What could that look like?

B. Second, I appreciate the lesson here of how faithful and persistent Ezekiel seems to have been in the midst of extremely challenging circumstances. He was willing, in order to communicate the word of God in all its fullness, to be perceived as a bit of a loony. He was willing to say the hard things, even if it caused him great fear. He desired to remain pure (see his concern about using human excrement to bake his bread) as he carried out his role. He was willing to stick to a task that probably didn’t seem too rewarding in the moment. In many ways, that is what ministry can be about as we prepare to teach a SS class or Bible study week after week, or visit shut-ins on a regular basis, or labor to bring about lasting social change. Faithfulness involves sticking to tasks where the reward cannot necessarily be experienced right away, trusting, as Paul puts it to the church in Corinth, that our labor for the Lord will never be in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).

C. Third, there is a lesson in here about how hard it is to actually hear the truth, and about how what we do becomes a vital part of the communication of God’s word. Looking back over the covenant curses as outlined in Lev. 26, I noticed that the punishment for disobedience begins, “But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands...” (v. 14). But it doesn’t end there. God then says, “If after all this you will not listen to me” (v. 18). “If you remain hostile toward me and refuse to listen to me” (v. 21). “If in spite of these things you do not accept my correction but continue to be hostile toward me” (v. 23). “If in spite of this you still do not listen to me but continue to be hostile toward me” (v. 27).

Do you get the picture of how hard it is to listen, especially when you are in the wrong?! No wonder God was seeking yet another way—living illustrations—to try and get his point across to his people.

That sermon title not only references what Ezekiel seems to be doing, it actually comes from our final hymn that calls for our hearts to be broken over the fragile and wounded world in which we live. But we are not only to have broken hearts. The hymn writer calls God’s people to be “visible expressions [that] God still rules above, living illustrations of the Living Word, to the minds of all who’ve never seen and heard” (v. 2). That may not call us to be tied up with ropes, or to eat meagre rations, or to shave the hairs on our head, but it does call us to be the hands of Jesus, the means by which the Lord reveals his grace, so that others might better be able to hear what the Lord wants, and needs, to say through us.

May God, by his Spirit, continue to raise us to our feet, that we might be living illustrations of his Living Word. Perhaps this prayer, taken from the 17th c. Westminster Confession of Faith (which I have put in the corporate plural), sums it up best:

Ancient of Days, we don’t have enough days in our lifetime to see the complete fulfillment of your kingdom vision. But give us the faith to embrace and act on your promises for this life, and the world to come, whether or not we see its fruit. By faith, help us to invest the days you have given us for the good of the world, with a living hope for your coming kingdom. Amen.