

“How Can We Keep on Singing?”

Introduction: Last week, as we opened the book of the prophet Ezekiel together, beginning a journey with this rather strange fellow that will take us into the season of advent, we noted that we find ourselves in the 6th c. B.C., when the people of God—the Israelites—found themselves in exile in Babylon. They had been defeated by a King called Nebuchadnezzar, and 10,000 of the cream of Jewish society had been skimmed out of Jerusalem, forced to leave both homes and temple behind, and made to live like strangers within a large, glittering, pagan empire. It was a shattering blow, filled with dislocation and anxiety. We observed that Psalm 137 expressed their emotional state in these words: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion [Jerusalem]. . . How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?” How, indeed, were they to live when stripped of all their privileges and power, cut off from the land and the temple, and surrounded by pagan practices?

We also observed that the 21st c. A.D. in which we live has become just as strange for the followers of the LORD. By any number of measures, the church in North America has been struggling in recent decades. These days, less than 20% of Americans attend church on a regular basis, and “regular” is revealed to be an average of 1.7x per month. Another 20% of Americans consider themselves to have no religious affiliation whatsoever. Having “no religion” can no longer be dismissed as describing some kind of “lunatic fringe.” With Christians becoming an unfashionable or odd minority, the lunatic fringe is now more likely to describe those who are trying to follow Jesus! How can we sing the songs of the LORD, how can we sustain, and practice, our faith in Christ in this strangely secular society of ours?

All that is to say, we seem to find ourselves, in the church, going through a new kind of exile, one from which it doesn’t seem we’re going to emerge anytime soon. If that’s the case, do Ezekiel, and the exiled community, have anything to teach us? I think they do, beginning with the fact that to sing the song of the LORD as strangers in a strange land we must be, at very basic level, people of the word and of the Spirit. It’s certainly who God called Ezekiel to be.

I. The Commission that Came with the Vision

A. We left Ezekiel last week in a state of awe, having fallen flat on his face! He dropped there in response to an incredible vision that God had given him of his glory, of God’s overwhelming holiness and justice and righteousness and beauty. The vision had come in the form of a multi-media display of strange figures, bizarrely rotating wheels, and the brilliant throne room of the Lord. If Ezekiel was to sing the song of the Lord in a strange land, if he was to see any light at the end of the tunnel, if he was to enable the exiled community to see that light, he must begin by basking in the light of God’s wonderful and incredible glory (cf. Ps. 36:9).

B. Importantly, this vision came not just so that Ezekiel could know that God was there and bask in his presence; it came with instructions, it came with the voice of God who had come to commission Ezekiel for ministry. Ezekiel, as we mentioned last week, had been training his whole life to serve as a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. Now that he was in exile, this dream seemed like it would never become a reality. But this voice had another idea: “No temple, no priestly service, no problem! Ezekiel, I want you to serve as my prophet, to be my mouthpiece to those in exile.” However, after hearing what such a prophetic ministry would entail, it sent Ezekiel into a week-long depression (3:15), for what God

was calling Ezekiel to do, at least for awhile, was carry his word of warning, of discipline, and of impending judgment to a people whose ancestors had been, and who themselves were continuing to be, even five years into exile, an obstinate, stubborn, and highly rebellious people (v. 3).

C. Such rebellion had begun centuries ago, just days after God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. The going got hard and they whined, and they wanted, incredibly, to go back! Then they built an idol, a golden calf, to worship. Then when Moses brought them their constitution, the terms of the covenant God had made with them, terms that were meant to bring them life and to enable them to reveal the living God to others, they proceeded to break that covenant right and left, from ignoring the poor and needy, to worshipping the local pagan gods even to the point of practicing the horror of child sacrifice. God had had enough and sent them into exile. But even then Ezekiel was warned that this people would struggle to listen to him, if they even listened at all. This prickly gang of scorpions was to be Ezekiel's first congregation, right out of seminary!

D. Not helpful was the presence of a number of people, claiming to be prophets, who were running around declaring that the exile was just a short-term thing, that it would be over in just a matter of weeks, and then they could all go home again. Israel would be returned to her former glory and life would return to normal. Similarly, in our day there are a number of folks who keep talking about revival, that just around the corner God is about to do something absolutely tremendous in our culture, which usually means that they hope things will go back to the way they were. Well far be it from me to say that God can't or won't bring revival! But I don't think it will happen quickly, nor will it be pain free. If there is to be any hope of revival, a great deal of repenting and dealing with the idols of our culture and the trappings of its power needs to take place. Ezekiel will have a message of hope and of glory, for the Israelites and for us, but it won't come about quickly or without significant changes.

How, then, would Ezekiel be able to sing the song of the LORD within this challenging environment, and throughout his challenging call? He, like we, must be a person of the word, and of the Spirit.

II. People of the Word and of the Spirit

A. God gives us a rather graphic picture of what it means to be a person of the word. If Ezekiel's mouth was not already hanging open from both the vision itself, and the challenging commission which followed, God calls Ezekiel to open that mouth and fill it with his word, with a scroll on which that word was written: "Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel" (3:1). It reminds us of Jesus' words when he was going through his own time of exile in the wilderness: "Man shall not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Ma. 4:4). Just as we need physical food from God's earth to sustain us, so we need a regular spiritual diet from God's mind and heart to keep our soul properly directed and encouraged.

Though it contained some things that were going to be hard for the people to hear, and would lead to lament, and mourning, and woe, when Ezekiel did eat it, it tasted as sweet as honey (3:3), perhaps giving sense of what it tastes like when God's word is not ignored but obeyed, an inner sweetness that only faithfulness to God can bring.

Notice also the order, for it is important. Ezekiel was to digest this word into the core of his being until it began to transform him. Then he was to speak. I appreciate the way in which the NLT puts this (3:10f):

Son of man, let all my words sink deep into your own heart first. Listen to them carefully for yourself. Then go to your people in exile and say to them, "This is what the sovereign LORD says."

If we're not fed and transformed by God's word ourselves, before bringing it to others, it really will not have much power. If we are to keep on singing the song of the LORD as strangers in a strange land, the "lyrics" must come from regular time spent listening to God's word for our own heart.

B. In tandem with being people of the word, so we can keep on singing, we must also be people of the Spirit. The Spirit is God's empowering presence. The Spirit is the one who makes the word alive. The Spirit is the one whose primary work is to establish a relationship between us and the divine mystery that is God, represented for Ezekiel by his vision. So it shouldn't surprise us when we see the Spirit accompanied that vision. It is the Spirit who lifts Ezekiel back onto his feet so he can hear the word of the Lord. It is the Spirit who conveys this word to Ezekiel in a way that he can take it in. And it is the Spirit who brings Ezekiel to the community that is to be his congregation.

It would be worth considering: How often do we try to stand on our own? Where might we be seeking to follow Jesus in our own strength? When might we be going out and trying to "do" some kind of ministry without first stopping to pray? Prayer, I think, is a helpful marker when it comes to being people of the Spirit, people who trust in the Spirit's power. Simply put, when we spend time praying, we are saying "Lord, I can't do this on my own; I need you and I will wait for you." When we don't pray, we are, in effect, saying "Lord, I've got this. You don't need to get involved." How, as the saying goes, does this usually work out?!

Illustration: In this regard, I appreciated the recent prayer letter we received from Brian and Malisa Ellis, a couple we support who have a campus ministry through a para-church organization called "Cru" among college students in Boston. Brian writes, "We always start the year with a heavy emphasis on prayer. It's a way we remember that God is present and is working on campus. It's also a reminder that we are totally dependent on him. Your prayers go before us and help us share the good news with college students." He then invites us as a congregation to go on a virtual prayer walk by means of a map he provides that highlights the ten different locations of the various campuses with whom they work, and some of the needs of each that we can pray for. As we do this, we are praying for a movement of the Spirit.

So may we make and take time to listen to the word of God each and every day. And may we call and wait upon the Spirit's presence through prayer. May the word, and the Spirit together, fill us and strengthen us so that, as we sing the songs of the Lord, we might attract others to the music we are making, and they may be moved to sing along with us.