Why America Isn't #1
Ezekiel 2:1-7
Rev. Thomas G. James
Washington Street UMC
July 4, 2021

As many you know, I tend to get away every six months or so to make plans for our worship services. I spend a lot of time in prayer and discernment trying to choose scriptures, sermon titles, and central themes for our services. Planning in advance helps offer guidance for the music ministry, and it helps us make plans for book studies that may accompany our worship theme. Getting away for such a week of planning has been challenging this past year, so admittedly, I'm behind schedule.

Thus, today's worship service was not planned very far in advance. In fact, just about 10 days ago, I got a text from Kyle – our Director of Music – asking, "What's the focus for July 4?" He needed to plan the music. I was on vacation, so I told him, your choice, asking, "What's in the lectionary?" He wrote back, and I have the texts to prove this, offering, "Oooh, Kyle's choice, I like this game." … I have now learned *not* to ask Kyle to choose the sermon title.

To be clear: I don't blame Kyle, I blame the lectionary. Having never preached on this text before, the Ezekiel passage begged to be used. So, this morning, I'll be preaching on the sermon titled, "Why America Isn't #1."

Now, I know today's a relatively well-known day in America … there's some history to this date. One might wonder, why preach on such a sermon on this day of national significance. I invite you to give 15 minutes, because Ezekiel offers us a pretty important word to hear, especially on this day, during which we celebrate our national independence.

As we begin, let me offer a brief context for the prophet Ezekiel.

Ezekiel had been a priest in the Jerusalem Temple prior to the Babylonian conquest. When the Babylonians sought to colonize the land of Israel, just after the start of the sixth century BCE, the Israelites were sent into exile, forced to live in the land of Babylon. The Babylonians destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, where Ezekiel had been a faithful leader.

In the book of Ezekiel, chapter 1 begins with Ezekiel naming that he was traveling with the exiles. The setting for the prophet Ezekiel is the first days and years of the exile itself.

The Israelites were at a loss for understanding the exile. Though a number of other prophets make clear that the exile was, at least in part, due to the Israelites lack of faithfulness, the Israelites in the moment questioned God's presence during this national tragedy. They wondered, had God left them – had the Babylonians defeated God – had God turned a back on the covenant people? How, and why would God let this happen?

Ezekiel will be called as a prophet to speak to God's enduring presence in the midst of a really difficult time. He wasn't called to speak to the Babylonians – to instill in them the fear of God for exiling the covenant people – no, he was called to speak to his own people: the people Israel.

Unlike some the prophecy of Isaiah, which offers a word of hope at the start of the exilic period, saying, "Comfort, o comfort my people," Ezekiel's prophetic invitation is quite different. Though a word of hope will eventually come, the first half of the book of Ezekiel, the first 24 chapters, are a continuous word of condemnation against the nation.

We are given some indication of this condemnation at Ezekiel's prophetic invitation.

Picking up in verse 3, Ezekiel says, "The Lord said to me, 'Mortal (or human one), 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.'"

We often think of Israel as nothing less than God's chosen covenant people. We believe that Israel is the twinkle in God's eye. We like to claim that Israel has the full favor of God. And, while we may not be wrong, having such favor doesn't mean being oblivious to or content with Israel's lack of faithful living. The Lord names to Ezekiel, this is a rebellious people – an unfaithful people – a proud people – a selfish people – a disrespectful and perverse people.

Picking up in verse 6, the Lord is still speaking of Ezekiel's task, saying, "You, o mortal, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns surround you and you live among scorpions …" (Yes, the Lord is referring to the Israelites as thorns and briers and scorpions.) "You, o mortal, do not be afraid of their words, and do not be dismayed by their looks, for they are a rebellious house. You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house."

"The messenger of God must be prepared to encounter hostility, contempt, and actual bodily injury, all painful as the sting of a scorpion."[i] It is not easy to call out family and friends, parishioners and community members, neighbors and loved ones in an way that continually reminds them of their rebellious nature. And yet, "regardless of the receptivity of the audience, the prophet is charged to speak to the designated audience."[ii]

Now, if I were offering a generous extrapolation of this text, I would simply say, the US is not so different than Israel. We are, and have been since our inception, a rebellious nation. Rebellion is literally in our national DNA. Our founders rebelled against the monarchy of Britain. Today, July 4, is a literal celebration of the victory of our rebellion against the monarchy, a power that sent the Red Coats to stop our rebellion and to quell our desire for independence.

If I were to offer a slightly less generous extrapolation of this text, I would say that our rebellion as a nation wasn't just against the monarchy. We have, as a nation, long rebelled against even the Christian values that were cited in the founding of our independent nation. The treatment of the North

American Natives by those who arrived from Europe did not espouse the ideals of Christianity. The enslavement of over 600,000 Africans on US soil did not promote the call of the Biblical text to claim new life for *all* of God's created humanity. The past 245 years have shown our rebellious nature against the will of God in many ways – from concentration camps, to unjust housing and education, to lack of representation and voting access … we have failed to be obedient, we have rebelled against God's law, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy.

But honestly, putting ourselves in the place of Israel in this Biblical story might be the most rebellious thing we can do. Thinking ourselves as the 'chosen ones' – God's new covenant people – a replacement, or stand in, for Israel is perhaps the most rebellious stance we can take.

When I consider this text and the title of, "Why America isn't #1," what I find myself convicted of is that … America isn't *not* #1 because of our tragic failing to treat all of God's created humanity as equal. Our biggest problem isn't the lack of equity that has long eroded our national community and the respect of our nation throughout the world. Without hesitation, these are major issues that, from a faith-based perspective, a prophet would be right to call us out on. But our failure to live faithfully as a nation – our inadequate upholding of Christ's covenantal invitation as a collective body – is not the reason we are not #1.

In verse 1 of this morning's reading, Ezekiel begins by saying, "The Lord said to me: *O mortal*, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when the Lord spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard the Lord speaking to me."

In this text, Ezekiel is never called by name. In fact, if we keep reading beyond chapter 2 in the book of Ezekiel, we will find that, when speaking with God, Ezekiel isn't referred to by his name at all. The Lord consistently refers to him as "O mortal," coming from the Hebrew phrase, *ben-'adam* (bane-adahm). It means, "one of humanity." *One of humanity.* The very title he is given by the Lord offers a specific statement about his identity. He is, though a prophet called to speak on God's behalf, just another *one* of humanity. His role will be important, for he will speak on behalf of God, but yet, he is still just another *one* of humanity.

In fact, he's such a lowly person, he's so limited by his identity as *one* of humanity, that he can't even stand before God without the literal breath of God to help him stand on his feet.

In verse 2, when it says, "a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet," the Hebrew for "spirit" is the word *ruach* (rue-achk). It's the wind, the breath, the spirit of God. It is the very spirit that gave life to the church at Pentecost that lifts Ezekiel to his feet, that empowers him to stand and to listen to the Lord.

Ezekiel, a declared prophet of the Lord, though important in his call, though empowered in his ministry, though a titled prophet of God's holy Word – Ezekiel was just another one of God's humanity. He was only able to do what he could do because of the very presence of the breath of God in his person.

See, we are not #1 as a nation, no matter how many more medals we win at the upcoming Summer Olympic games … we aren't #1 as nation, no matter how much more wealth we may have than other nations … we aren't #1 as a nation, no matter how much more freedom we give our citizens that other nations … we aren't #1 as a nation, even as we celebrate our independence that came through victory on the battle field. We aren't #1, because even as great as we might think ourselves to be, ***even the prophet couldn't stand on his own feet without the breath of God in his lungs.***

We weren't called or created to be #1, no matter our self-declaration.

The invitation of the Biblical text is not to try and usurp the role of being #1.

As God's created, at best, if even, we are created to be #2 – and that #2 is an invitation to share in life with all of humanity, who only have the possibility of being faithful because of #1, who breathes life into our very existence.

If we, collectively – whether as a church, a city, or nation – if we really want to claim faithfulness, the best we can do is invite God to breath on us once more and give us purpose to speak on behalf of God, and to declare that only through God's power, might we exemplify the will of God for the world. And in doing so, we have to understand that that way of living may be deemed unpopular, even by others in our rebellious nation. But the Biblical text makes clear, there is but one to whom we can claim true faithfulness. It is not ourselves – not our corporate or national identity. Any other allegiance, aside from faithfulness to God, will set us at odds with the will of God for the world. For God, and God alone, is #1 and worthy to be praised … the rest of us are just part of God's created.

So whether Ezekiel or Israel … whether pastor or member … whether in the pews at the church or on the couch at home … we have this invitation to hear from the prophet, the mortal one, who is called and empowered to speak even amidst the rebelliousness of creation. For the way of God, the way of Christ, the way of new life and abundant peace, it will stand in opposition to the ways of the world which center self and power. God's way, the way of hope and love, the way of peace and justice, the way of reconciliation and heavenly pride, the way of equity and responsibility … that way is #1. America isn't #1, God's will ***is***. Thanks be to God. Amen, and amen.

---

[i] Walther Eichrodt. Ezekiel: A Commentary (Old Testament Library). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.

[ii] Stephen Brock Reid. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3.* Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2009.