

The Story: God's Messengers

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[0 : 00] So this morning we're continuing in our series, there it is, on the story. As we explore the Bible, not as a random collection of really old writing, but as the story of God, a story that includes each of our individual stories as well.

So as we talk about the story, we talk about the fact that there is an upper story and a lower story. Oh, sorry. Oh, shoot. I have a, just one sec. I just have to, it's really embarrassing. Just a sec. Yeah, no, no, not a good time. Yeah, no, I'll get back. I promise I'll get back to you. Yes, gotta go. Okay, bye. Well, so that was a little embarrassing. Me being interrupted by a call like that this morning is kind of the idea, as we'll be looking at the story today. God is trying to reach people with a message.

And the question is, will they respond to God or will they screen the call and let it go to voicemail? We're still in the book of 2 Kings this morning.

You'll forgive me for not having my usual breadth of slides. I ran out of time. Shocking. So we're going to learn this morning that the message that God wants his people to hear is delivered by special servants called prophets.

[1 : 32] Because the Bible is arranged topically and not chronologically, many people can kind of get lost in their Bible at this point.

There's a lot of history. There's a lot of kings. There's a lot of stuff. The books of the Old Testament are arranged as, not chronologically, as I said, but as history, as poetry, and as prophecy.

And we see that those distinct styles of writing appear in different books. And the story can get a bit jumbled and confusing at times.

Because it's not written start to finish. Like our sermon series is looking at the Bible. It's not written in a way that many of us would be expecting.

Once upon a time, and then you learn about the princess and the prince, and there's conflict, and then, oh, and there's a happy ending. The end. It's not that easy when it comes to scripture.

[2 : 31] And we like to be spoon-fed in that way quite often, don't we? That's why people like Netflix. You don't have to make another choice. I made a choice. It starts again in three seconds.

Perfect. And then your entire evening's gone. But that's what we like, right? We like to be spoon-fed. We like to know expectations. We like our expectations met.

We don't really like surprises. So you'll remember last week we talked about the kingdom of God's people being torn in two. Do you remember that? Divided into ten tribes called Israel in the north, and just two tribes in the south called Judah.

We read about the northern nation being defeated by the Assyrians, and the southern nation falling to Babylon. So you may have heard of the Assyrians and the Babylonians, two huge, very powerful nations at that time.

And it can be a bit confusing, as I said, as you read these accounts, and you might be tempted to give up, because sometimes it's tough going, reading scripture.

[3 : 38] But don't give up. Don't do it. Don't give in to the temptation to give up. Do you remember last week in the lower story, our human story, there was a conflict between two kings, Jeroboam and Rehoboam.

They were the kings of the two nations, Israel and Judah. And that is where the nation split in two over this conflict. But we've recognized all along that God continues to be at work in his upper story, right?

We recognize that. So why did God divide the nation into two? We're going to look briefly, and I say briefly, because I know you're already getting jumpy.

We're going to look briefly at a few things that were behind God dividing the nation. To begin with, God divided the nation because his people were sending the wrong message.

His people were sending the wrong message. And when the people chose their own path, their own story, over and over and over, we've seen throughout this series that they struggled.

[4 : 52] Does that sound familiar in your own life? When you choose your own way, over and over, does it get easier and easier and easier? Rarely. Rarely.

So do you find that when something you think is going to make you happy, do you find that it somehow usually falls short? Or that the happiness that you achieved wears off?

God was looking to bless his people. And through that blessing, to make other people aware of him and drawn to him.

As we touched on last week, the people rebelled against God, disobeying his commands and worshipping pagan gods. And in that disobedience, they were sending the wrong message to themselves and also to surrounding nations.

And unlike Maria, and Bill and Anne-Marie, who've declared their allegiance to God and his plan for their lives this morning, the people at that time were declaring something else.

[6 : 10] They were declaring they want their own way. We want our own way. Our way is probably better for us. Who knows us better than us?

Nobody. So while they were seen by other nations as people who follow God, their behavior, their actions, sent an entirely different message.

And it was at that point that God divided the nation so that he could purify, so that he could redeem the message of his character.

Our sermon this morning is titled, God's Messengers. I love how over and over throughout Scripture, God defies expectations.

He turns our understanding directly on its head. And he reveals his nature to us. And he reveals that his plan is far greater, far more miraculous than anything we could possibly ever conceive of ourselves.

[7 : 22] And so not only does God split the nation, he chooses to work through the two tribes of the southern kingdom.

The two tribes. Rather than working through the ten tribes of the north. Isn't that God? God, typical God. You expect this much, I can work with that much.

We have high expectations. Gods are very different. God can and will, and you've probably all experienced this in your lives.

God can and will work through any circumstances. And he will work with, or in spite of, people.

Do you recognize that as well? Has God worked in your life in spite of you being stubborn, or disobedient? Has God blessed you in ways that you couldn't imagine?

[8 : 25] And when you compare it to your own plan for your life, wow, not even close. Remember what we've talked about before, that God does not measure by human standards.

And only God can see our true nature. Do you remember that as well? Only God can see beyond our masks that we put on, our masks that we wear.

And the ways that we deceive ourselves and others. God sees through all of that. My friends, God knows our deepest, darkest nature.

The filthy muck of everything that we've done. And yet, he still loves us. Think about that for a moment.

The things that you don't share with your spouse. The things that you don't admit to other people.

[9 : 24] The things that you think no one would notice, and maybe no one has. God knows all of it. And he loves you anyway.

If you're like me, you may have a level of achievement or an expectation set for yourself.

Bill and I confessed this to each other the other night. And maybe your expectation, the bar that you've set for yourself, you're able to meet that sometimes.

Maybe it's because you've set it low. I don't know. But then you raise it again. Right? Do you set a bar for yourself, achieve it, and then raise that bar?

Do you set a bar for yourself, shoot low, and drop the bar down for next time? Or maybe that bar that you've set for yourself, you're never able to meet it.

[10 : 24] You've never been able to meet it, and you never will. If you take just one thing away with you this morning, I'd like it to be this.

And that doesn't mean stop listening after this point. No. I'd like it to be this, that God looks at you, each of you. Take this as I'm speaking to you directly.

God looks at you and sees no bar. God looks at you and sees no standard of measurement of any kind, save for faith in Him.

Got it? No bar. No bar. No bar. No bar from your God. Nothing you have ever done or will ever do, good or bad, will change how God views you.

Keep trying to disappoint Him, you won't. Keep trying to fail Him, you won't. or you can choose to keep receiving His love and forgiveness, which is always there.

[11 : 48] Returning to our place in the story, God sent prophets to the northern kingdom, Israel. And remember, that's the kingdom that turned away from Him. God sent these messengers specifically to call His people back to obedience.

And over a period of 208 years, God sent nine prophets to 19 kings. Now, there's a reason I'm an English major.

I often say to math friends who are math people, English major, you do the math. But that's important. Those are important numbers.

A period of 209 years, over two generations. God sent nine prophets to 19 kings. And of those nine prophets, the only prophet that people listened to and obeyed was Jonah.

The people who listened to Jonah, taking it a step further, weren't even God's people. They were the Ninevites. They won't listen.

[13 : 00] They wouldn't listen. And two of the prophets that were sent by God were named Elijah and Hosea. You may be familiar with the well-known story of Elijah and his encounter with the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

Look it up. It's very fun. It's one of my favorite stories, and I'm really tempted to read the whole thing, but we don't have time. But God, when you read that account, God was really fired up on that day.

Pun intended. And I love that story so much because it's a sign, it's a dazzling account of God's power.

And as I said, I'd love to read through it, but I encourage you to read about it yourselves. It's 1 Kings 18 from 19 to 40, and it is awesome.

And if you think God doesn't have a sense of humor, that story will likely change your mind.

Through Elijah, God sent a message to his people that he alone is God, and no other false gods can possibly stand before his power.

[14 : 15] And during this period, we also learn, as I mentioned, of the prophet Hosea. And he had a pretty distinctive prophetic ministry in the Old Testament.

Often, you can probably imagine, prophets would outwardly demonstrate their message by wearing ragged clothes or doing something out of the ordinary to draw attention to their message.

Over here, I have something really important to say. But Hosea was instead instructed in a very different way. Hosea was instructed to marry a woman who was continuously unfaithful and who prostituted herself.

And her name was Gomer. What was God thinking with that one? Have you ever wondered? That seems like, Lord, that seems like a very strange example.

And maybe, have you ever thought, maybe God made a mistake? Maybe that's not how? Yeah, good luck. It was the way Hosea lived his life in those uncertain circumstances, those challenging circumstances, through his marriage to Gomer, that God was able to display the deep love that he has for his people.

[15 : 41] Even through their rebellion. He put him in a challenging set of circumstances and Hosea had the opportunity to be God in the unlikeliest situation.

So even though people were rebelling, even though they willfully chose their own selfish, short-sighted ways over God's better plan for them, through his messengers, through the prophets, God warned his people that choosing their own way would ultimately result in pain and death.

But through the prophets, he also conveyed a message of hope and salvation. So we see that the people often chose their own path regardless of the consequences.

We recognize that. And God's message to his people then, as is so often the case today as well, fell on deaf ears.

And a lot of those deaf ears, I believe, were and still are today attached to stubborn brains, right? Deaf ears and stubborn brains.

[17 : 06] people that thought they knew better. You know me, you created me, still know better, still going to do what I want to do. My friends, God speaks to his people today, just as he did in those days.

He speaks to us today, just as he did all those years ago. And God is looking to show us a better way.

A way of hope and restoration in relationship with him. The question is, when that message comes to us, do we even begin to hear it?

Has that message of truth somehow been drowned out in our lives by other messages? Of pride? Self-interest?

Bitterness? Anger? Maybe even want or greed? I don't know about you, but I can be very good at self-numbing.

[18 : 22] And I'll explain what I mean by that. At distracting myself from being discouraged or convincing myself that I've covered all the bases.

self-numbing. Pretending the problem isn't really a problem at all or doesn't even exist. Can you relate to that? But you know, in that process of self-numbing, ultimately, my answers, the messages I keep telling myself over and over, as I touched on before, begin to lose their impact and lose their effectiveness on me.

My friends, God has a message for you. It is a message of peace, of freedom, of unconditional love. and this message is yours to freely accept and receive. God is calling you to trust His plan for your life.

To surrender and deepen your relationship with Him. Will you answer that call?

[19 : 45] We've seen God at work here in a very clear and public way this morning. As Maria, Bill, and Anne-Marie have taken a public step in declaring their commitment to God.

Please, don't let the moment go by if you are a follower of Jesus and have never taken that step in baptism. because you know I'm open to it.

And if you'd like to find out more about baptism or you'd like to be baptized, let's talk about it. I would be happy to help you take that step in your spiritual journey.

When we choose to follow Jesus, it's also very important that we don't keep this message to ourselves. Jesus asks us to celebrate this decision with our family, our friends, and the community around us.

I got baptized this weekend. I was at a baptism service this weekend at my church. Baptism might seem like an odd way to share an important decision that we've made about our faith.

[21 : 12] but let baptism be the start of many conversations that you'll have as you share your faith. Share God's message with others.

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