

Marc Steele (5)

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Preacher: Deacon Marc Steele

[0:00] Amen. Amen.

Father Paul Sutliff, who is someone that runs a website that compiles ACNA lectionary readings, observed the shortness of today's lessons and thought that maybe that was permission for the preacher to go extra long.

I don't know. They were very short readings, though, that were assigned. There is something you need to get to know about me as your deacon.

This is still one of these feeling each other out periods. It's still kind of like a job interview a little bit. I've only been here a couple years. And you guys don't know me as well as my wife knows me. My wife knows this about me very well. That is, when I read a book or watch a movie, that affects my personality a lot.

[1:30] If I go to see a James Bond movie, there's a certain swagger that I bring with me out of the theater. It is so embarrassing.

I can't keep it in control. And when I watched the Christopher Nolan Batman movies, that was an interesting experience coming out of that as well. So, Scripture does the same thing to me.

And this is what my wife can majorly testify to. About five years ago, I began an intensive study of the prophet Jeremiah. Now, what do you know about the prophet Jeremiah?

What is his nickname? The Weeping Prophet. Yes. And it didn't help that that coincided with a lot of spiritual turmoil in my own life.

A lot of struggles we were having. So, over two years of intense studying and teaching the prophet Jeremiah, there were regularly times when teaching, when reading Scripture, I would openly weep and be cast down by what I was reading.

[2:36] And the Bible works like that. It does offer comfort. But sometimes people emote about how they read Scripture and how wonderful they feel inside.

And I've got to ask them, Have you read the whole thing? Because I'm reading these passages, and they don't lift up my spirit.

They make me realize the brokenness of the world around me. While the Bible offers comfort, it does so in the real world. A place filled with hate and pain because of our sin.

It does not ignore the fallen nature of our world. Scriptures show us the lives of men and women who proclaim the gospel in the midst of terrible situations.

I think that's very important for us to take note of. The Bible is a fable about people who do God's will in a fairy tale, perfect world, and then go on to live happily ever after lives with their prince or princess charming.

[3:47] What do we as Christians do then when we are faced with life's bitter, crushing blows? Especially when opposition comes for the exact reason that we choose to obey God and proclaim God's truth.

When we turn to the Ezekiel 2 passage, This is why the call of Ezekiel is so important for us today. Because the setting, the place of our shared story, is so important for us to understand. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel were all prophets during the exact same time period.

In Jeremiah's life, the unthinkable had occurred. God sent judgment upon the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, the only two groups of God's covenant people left in the promised land.

While the other ten tribes have been removed from the land as a judgment from God by the Assyrians about a hundred years before Ezekiel's passage today, Judah stayed behind with Jerusalem as its crown glory.

[5:07] And the mission given to them from God was to glorify him in that city of promise. Yet despite the example of the ten tribes who had been judged just a century earlier, this remnant too

failed.

Our God is a jealous God. He calls us to worship him alone, and he calls us to worship him in spirit and in truth. Amen. Judah stopped worshipping God as God and worshiped him as Baal, just like the pagans around them.

In one chapter later on in this book, Ezekiel tells us that the very temple of God was devoted to pagan sacrifices. Today, archaeologists are pulling up from this time period Baal statues with Asheroth within homes.

Also, with scripture readings, with other things that were supposed to be devoted to God. So they took a worship to God, and they began to pull in pagan worship from the land around them into their homes.

Judah rejected God's word and wanted to be relevant, to fit in with the culture of the time, to live in a world where they could worship a God who was made in the image of the world they lived in, not the God who revealed himself in his word to the prophets and the patriarchs who went before.

[6:46] And God cannot accept that. In his severe mercy, he strips Judah from Jerusalem. Over a 20-year period, and this happens about 600 years before Jesus came, Babylon removes Judah from the land in three waves.

The best and brightest of Judah are taken out of the land in the first exile. And that's where Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Benigel come to Babylon. Ezekiel, our prophet today, is in the second exile.

And then finally Judah is destroyed and left desolate at the end of the third wave. Our passage today occurs between the second and third exiles.

The people of Judah, whether in captivity in Babylon, or whether the remnant still left behind in Jerusalem waiting for that third event, they're in denial. They think that because they're part of God's chosen nation, they're somehow owed protection by God.

It's almost as if they are saying, God needs us, so we can act any way we choose, and he's just going to have to put up with that.

[8:04] As Anglicans, we've seen that attitude today. As a matter of fact, in our diocesan synods, we've spent a lot of time examining this, at least the last two that I went to.

There is a particularly wicked, worldly attitude that's been taken on by the majority of the church in America. It goes a little something like this. This is just one example of how it shows up in our context.

At my ordination, not that long ago, Bishop Julian laid hands on me. This is part of a chain that goes back to the apostles.

It's a very important thing. But, there are men who think that this laying on of hands is all that they need to be a minister of God.

Many of them go on to teach heresy and to live immoral lives, claiming that their place in apostolic succession, that laying on of hands we talked about, somehow gives them a license to reinterpret who God is, according to their own sinful image.

[9:22] But, fortunately, we come from a diocese where a second thing happens. We have another bishop. And in that ordination, he came and did a second thing.

He came up to me and gave me a Bible. It's this actual Bible here. I am only a minister of God and can only remain one so long as I uphold this word.

If I fail on this, if I worship a God that fits the corrupting desire of sin within me, I am no longer his servant. I am no longer God's minister.

See, I can't hide behind a title and I can't hide behind a laying on of hands. And by the way, this isn't something reserved for clergy. This is for all Christians.

You cannot call yourself a child of Jerusalem and not live underneath the rule of Jerusalem's king. Yet, within the time of the passage written today, false prophets, and this is recorded back in Jeremiah, they started a big business.

[10:38] It was the business of telling people that God would not judge them for their sin. You can continue doing whatever you want. The Babylonian exile is just a mirage.

Something that will be done away with and will never actually materialize. And it was a popular message. People loved it. The king loved it.

He brought them in, gave them the greatest honors, fed them the best food. If you want to be a popular preacher today, there's a pretty simple formula.

You just tell people that they can continue in their sin and still be blessed. Tell them this is how God wants them to live, to be greedy, to pursue whatever partner they want, to lie.

It doesn't matter. God just wants you to be happy. This wasn't just an Old Testament attitude. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul warns us, the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and they will turn away from listening to truth and wander off into myths.

[12:01] So what do we see at the calling of Ezekiel? Maybe we can call this Ezekiel's ordination. The first thing we see is that his calling was from God and not from man.

Beginning in verse 1, And he said to me, Son of man, stand on your feet and I will speak with you. And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet and I heard him speaking to me.

We are exiting an awesome and mind-bending vision of God's glory from chapter 1. And out of the wonder of God's glory, a voice comes to him and gives him a charge.

Ezekiel was answerable to God, not man. Therefore, whose duty was it for him to please? God.

His entire ministry was based on the charge given to him by God. And when you are a minister, who you are trying to please changes the nature of your message.

[13:31] It is God's message and it is a hard one to give and it is words that will be rejected by most of Ezekiel's audience. verse 3.

And he said to me, Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels who have rebelled against me.

They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. the descendants also are impudent and stubborn. I send you to them and you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord God. Whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house, they will know that a prophet has been among them. the Lord charges them with their sins.

In Babylon, he is making them face their need to be restored to him. Earlier, I called this exile.

[14:41] And that's a neat little short word that ignores the fact that children died, that mothers died, that fathers died, the large percentage of the population died in this.

We gloss over sometimes the tragedy that's come. We cover over a lot of tragedy in that word exile. That exile was painful, tore families apart.

But I called it a severe mercy. Why would I call this punishment of a whole nation a good thing? It was not possible for Judah to face their sins in Jerusalem because they had lied to themselves for centuries about the nature of their sin.

This delusion started small, but like a little leaven that leavens the whole lump of dough. As the years rolled by, the prophets were ignored, the nation became more and more used to the sin that had become part of their lives.

all the warning signs were given to them and they failed to repent. This is what happens when sin is allowed to continue in the community unchecked.

[16:00] But now for them, Babylon has become a place to draw closer to God than they ever could have in Jerusalem. God does not abandon them in exile.

He sends a minister. Here in the place where Judah faces the destruction of their sin, God still reaches out to them. Most will refuse to hear, but we see that some will.

Yet, Ezekiel does not preach for the approval of either audience. He just remains faithful to God.

The office of prophet and preacher are very similar.

They're not exactly the same in how they are carried out, but they have the same purpose. The main purpose of a prophet was not to predict the future. That was a secondary consequence.

The calling of clergy in this parish and this diocese is to preach with a prophetic voice. That is, we are like Ezekiel, called to clearly and without embarrassment or excuse proclaim God's unchanging truth to a world that is perverse and hates the light.

[17:17] As the night becomes darker, God's called preacher becomes bolder. And by the way, again, this call is not limited to clergy.

This is the call for everyone in this parish. For everyone that names the name of Christ, we are all preachers.

We preach every moment of every day, whether it's to our children, to our spouses, to the waitress at the Dunkin' Donuts counter, to our co-worker, we're all preachers.

Peter writes to the church, you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people, once you were in spiritual Babylon, now you are God's people. You dwell in spiritual Jerusalem, even if for a time you were in physical Babylon.

[18:30] Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. God's word flowed through Ezekiel.

It was not a man-made message, and it was used to draw people to a place of repentance. The same spirit which took Ezekiel drew him to his feet, also filled his mouth with the word of God.

That same spirit also drew a nation out of the disobedient exiles, a nation that was true to its king. Consider this passage from Ezekiel chapter 11.

Thus says the Lord God, though I removed them far off among the nations, speaking of Judah, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone.

Therefore say, thus says the Lord God, I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.

[19:51] When they come there, they will remove from it all detestable things and all its abominations, and I will give them one heart and a new spirit, I will put within them, I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, so they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them.

And they shall be my people and I will be their God. So you see that the ministry given to Ezekiel is part of what I call God's longing. Just came back from Jerusalem two weeks ago, Raymond did too. I think you can look, you didn't see this fulfilled in the land that we saw, right? the mission given to Ezekiel is still going on. I have three things that I want us to take out of here today from our time in Ezekiel.

Here's the first thing. Ezekiel was rejected by almost everyone around him. Let us not be mistaken. Ezekiel's ministry was an announcement of revolution against the powers of this age. Every person, position, and institution devoted to maintaining the presence of sin on this world.

[21:22] All those who answer to Satan, the enemy of our souls. And that world will seek to destroy us.

our response is not to seek to destroy them in return, but to continually and faithfully declare the gospel so that some might be won over to the kingdom of the light of Christ's love.

And we are to do that with courage, because it is God who is on our side, the creator and Lord of the universe. God is on the world.

I can't help but think, as I was preparing this, of Archbishop Ben Quasici, who we mentioned last week, was elected to, I would argue, maybe the most powerful position in the Anglican world.

I would argue that at least. Some would disagree, but we can discuss that after the sermon. You know, what do you do these days when you get elected into the highest position in the denomination?

[22:35] You typically sign with the school, you get a book deal, you get an interview circuit, and you start making money. That's what typically happens.

Archbishop Quasici instead went back to his dirt port orphanage in Joss, Nigeria, where he houses 50 orphans, runs a school there, runs his diocese, and had his best friend murdered, I think, two days after you ride back.

Nancy Harrington sent me a video on Facebook this week, one of Archbishop Quasici's first sermons, and I had already had my sermon done, and I was watching last night, doing my fun stuff after I had done my homework.

I watched this video, and immediately was at the table writing down what he said. Archbishop Quasici, who has seen hundreds of his dioceses killed at the hands of Muslims, because they named the name of Christ to his congregants, said this this week.

They do kill some of us, but those who are alive just continue. We will not wait for persecution to stop.

[24:05] We will not wait for persecution to end before we preach the gospel. We just keep preaching. preaching. If we die, we die preaching. If we live, we continue the job.

So, even when persecution stops, we do not have to ignite fresh engines. We are in business, and we are in a very good business, a business that killing cannot stop, money cannot buy, and nothing can stop us.

See, the persecuted church understands suffering in a way that we in America do not. In fact, most of us think we are going to skate through this church thing without paying any sort of cost or facing any type of resistance.

I would go so far as to say the church in America thinks that we can exist as a church, in a prejudged Jerusalem, without facing persecution.

The American church is compromised, and many times you don't even realize it. We think our sinful society is normal, and then we try to find a way to fit into it.

[25 : 28] There is a man who is a non-Anglican, Roger Olson, who I disagree with on a few things. But he wrote an independent observation of the third GAPCON conference that we had.

And as he closed out his observation as an outsider, he said something that was very striking to me, and I have to agree with him on this point.

Roger Olson writes of the GAPCON conference that me, Raymond, Bishop Dave, and Bishop Julian just came back from, said. Why does this GAPCON thing matter to non-Anglican evangelicals?

Well, one thing these events say rather loudly is from Christians and brothers and sisters of the global soul that they are no longer dependent on European and American Christians for their theology and ethics.

Christians. They will go their own ways, especially insofar as they perceive Western, really Northern Christians, as defecting from true, authentic Christian theology and morality.

[26 : 40] And eventually, if not already, they will view us as mission fields. I know from numerous personal conversations with them that this is already how they viewed Europe, United States, and Canada.

Some years ago, I met and had extended conversations with the late Fesco Kivangary, Anglican Archbishop of Uganda, and an evangelical Christian known by many as the Billy Graham of Africa. And he let me and others know in no uncertain terms that he believed American Christianity was profoundly flawed and in need of a new evangelization toward authentic Christianity by African and other global South Christians.

From the perspective of many, probably most, global South Christians, we European and North American Christians, have so profoundly accommodated to modernity in our theology and ethics that we are now not really authentically Christian.

Christian. Oh, I don't take them as saying we're not saved. I take them as saying we are blind to our own commitments to consumerism, progressivism, and naturalism, that we cannot find our own way out of those commitments that have come to replace our commitments to Jesus Christ.

[28 : 02] End of quote. If being a citizen of the Western world means turning away from Jesus, we've got to make a choice.

If our choice is Jesus, we're going to have to pay a price for it. Ezekiel chapter 2 verse 6, And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, even though briars and thorns are with you, and you sit on scorpions.

Be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house. We need courage. the second takeaway I want us to bring out of this passage today is this. The message we declare is judgment to some and salvation for others.

It's one of those hard things about the gospel to understand. In other words, we can say the exact same thing to two different people, and it will be heard differently depending on the work of the Spirit in their hearts.

[29 : 33] Smooth past our sign reading for today in the lessons. Let's look at verses 8-10. Ezekiel's message is a terrible message of judgment for rebels.

But you, O son of man, hear what I say to you. Be not rebellious like that rebellious house. Open your mouth and eat what I give you. And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, the scroll of the book was in it.

And he spread it out before me, and it had writing on the front and on the back. And there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe.

That's some way to categorize somebody's preaching, right? Words of lamentation, mourning, and woe. If we continue on, we see that these words for Ezekiel are transformed in the mouth of an obedient son.

Chapter 3, verse 1. And he said to me, son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll, go speak to the house of Israel.

[30 : 50] So I opened my mouth and he gave me the scroll to eat. And all those words of lamentation and mourning and woe. And he said to me, son of man, feed your belly with the scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.

Then I ate it, and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey. Jesus is the word of God, the bread of life, and the living water, but only to those that approach him through faith.

He also is the way, and no man can approach the Father except through him. For that reason, Jesus' exclusive role as Savior to the world is judgment to some and sweet to those who trust in him.

Our third takeaway is that Ezekiel's message is ultimately one of hope, even though it starts with mourning. We don't really have time to explore the 48 chapters that are in Ezekiel today.

If we did, we would see that the first call from Ezekiel is to admit that we're losers. And hey, listen, that's a hard message to sell these days.

[32 : 15] Turn on the news. Listen to the political conversation we have going on. The one thing that unites the left and unites the right is they both hate losing. They both love talking about how they're winners.

Left wing or right wing, losing is a poison pill. Well, we have to go to the right of the right. But Christ has told us that we must lay down our lives to find them.

This is the same message given in Ezekiel. Through the ministry of the word, he calls to all those who would repent, to turn to God in faith and find salvation.

salvation. But that salvation is eternal one, one yet being revealed to us, one that is yet to be fully seen. We peer now through a mirror darkly.

Ezekiel will continue to preach against sin and speak of the judgment to come. If we continue the book, we'll begin to see a new theme creeping in. He begins to speak of a new Jerusalem.

[33 : 23] He gives a lot of dimensions and measurements that are hard for me to understand, mainly because I don't measure things in cubits anymore. There's big details that come out.

One is, there's no sin in this new Jerusalem. That's amazing. Now I began thinking, just talking to my mind, me and Ray didn't get a chance to meet up a lot.

We planned this buddy-buddy tour across Jerusalem that never materialized. So last night we got to go to Bethlehem, which is across the border. And it can be a little difficult to navigate.

And I asked Ray on the way back through because you're always a little nervous that you're going to be let back into the place that you want to get let back into. We're typically fine because the American passport gets you through a lot.

And I asked Ray looking around at the Israel around us, do you think we're going to have these borders here when Christ returns? And Ray's answer was, we're not even going to be able to recognize this place from Christ returns.

[34 : 29] That's New Jerusalem we're talking about. The biggest difference, the very last verse of this massive book, we're not even going to call it Jerusalem anymore.

The name of the city from that time on shall be, the Lord is there. And because of this we have this hope that this New Jerusalem, the New Jerusalem of Jesus, the King will be present.

Because we know that there are two kinds of exiles. This is the hope we have. We have rebels who will be destroyed when the King returns.

There are also pilgrims who excitedly wait for the city who has foundations whose designer and builder is God. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.