

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 09 – Year B

RCL Readings¹ – Ezekiel 2:1-5; Psalm 123; II Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

ACNA Readings – Ezekiel 2:1-7; Psalm 123; II Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-6

Seasonal Introduction. The Christian calendar revolves around two principal feasts: Christmas (involving Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany) and Easter (involving Lent, Easter, and Pentecost). Then there is a large section in the middle called ordinary time. This season often focuses on the growth of the Church, ending in a season known as Kingdome tide which concludes with the feast of Christ the king. During this time we read and hear the bulk of the teachings of Jesus in relation to the kingdom of heaven and how we are called to live as disciples of the Messiah.²

Common Theme. There is a common theme of rejection running through this week's readings. Ezekiel will be charged with delivery of a message predestined to be ignored, the psalmist will entreat the Lord for mercy while receiving contempt and scorn, while the Gospel reveals the negative attitude from the residents of Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. The Gospel passage will go further though in displaying the reaction of Jesus to rejection. And the reaction is expansion!

Hebraic Context. Location, location, location. Choosing the right location is incredibly important for almost everything. In economics choosing the right location, located on or off major trade routes, can make all the difference for a business.³ In politics knowing where to hold a rally to get the best results may be the difference between winning or losing an election. Meanwhile, preparing the right battlefield in war has completely changed history. Location is important in nearly all planning and preparation. And yet, it can so often be overlooked in the Bible.

The truth is, geography is theology. Place and location matter to the narrative and add nuance and insight to the message of the story. The Bible clearly marks the location of certain events: Jesus went up on a mountain; the disciples were fishing on a boat in the Galilee; Deborah and Barak defeated Sisera near the River Kishon.⁴ If God believes it important to record the place where things happened then it certainly should not be something we ignore.

¹ Alternative RCL Readings: II Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Psalm 48

² Usually from the Synoptic Gospels. This year, year B, the Gospel of Mark is studied. We also study passages with similar themes to the Gospel or go through several books of the Bible (largely from I Samuel-I Kings and the writings from Proverbs, Job, and Ruth in the Alternate reading of year B).

³ Yes, trade routes still matter—international trade still goes through specific airports, along rivers, and through ports. But also locally, which coffee shop do you frequent? Presumably the one that is on the way to work.

⁴ “The torrent Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.” Torrent, נַחַל (naḥal), is more commonly translated as brook or valley with a little water. The irony is that the Kishon is not a gushing torrent of water that will drown men and sink chariots—the Kishon can be hopped over by an athletic five year-old. Everyone who lived near the Jezreel valley would recognize that God must have given the victory specifically because the River Kishon was mentioned in Deborah's song declaring the victory.

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The rejection and contempt for the message of God occurred in several different locations: a synagogue, where people specifically assembled to hear the Word of God; Nazareth, the hometown of the Messiah; and Babylon, a place of exile due to earlier rejections of God. The message of the redemption and the kingdom of heaven can be refused from within places of worship and religious community gatherings. It can occur within families and local homes, not just away from the familiar in foreign lands.⁵ But out of Babylon Judaism started to spread with the power of a people who refused to bend the knee to anyone but the almighty God. Out of Nazareth, James (the brother of Jesus) became a great leader of the early church. And out of the synagogues of the Galilee many heard the good news of the Gospel, were healed, and followed Jesus—even to Jerusalem.

Ezekiel 2:1-5.⁶ Even though Ezekiel was exiled, the opening chapters of Ezekiel contain prophecies against Judah and Jerusalem, not against Babylon, which sent him into exile and, later, would destroy the temple that was so precious to Ezekiel.⁷ ⁸ Having fallen on his face from

⁵ Paul even had to deal with the rejection of many fellow saints within the church of Corinth—brothers and sisters in the faith Paul knew and loved.

⁶ ACNA includes Ezekiel 2:1-7

⁷ Ezekiel, עֶזְקֵאל (Yahezkiel), means “My God is strong” or “My God strengthens”. Ezekiel differs from most of his fellow prophets in that he was both a prophet and a priest. Ezekiel would have likely served in the Temple in Jerusalem before its destruction in 587/6, although he may not have as Ezekiel was already sent into exile as a young man prior to the fall of Jerusalem. Therefore, Ezekiel’s prophetic vision in the book of Ezekiel would have taken place while in exile. It is important to note that Ezekiel’s visions took place outside the land of Israel—the land God had promised for Israel (but that He also promised they’d be removed from if they forgot the LORD their God).

⁸ As part of the diaspora literature, Ezekiel appears to have used some Babylonian (Akkadian) idioms and Mesopotamian visual and literary motifs that his audience would have better understood (which, coincidentally, sometimes makes it harder for us to understand his meaning coming from a different culture, literacy, and language). Ezekiel also seems to assume his audience would understand his geographical and regnal references.

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the glory of God and the voice from heaven, Ezekiel, a mere mortal (son of man),⁹ was told to stand.¹⁰

The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel through the Spirit.¹¹ Ezekiel is one of the few prophets in which the Spirit 'enters' him to speak to and through him.¹² God then sent the prophet to a difficult crowd, to a rebellious people who would stubbornly refuse the message.

One might question the wisdom and or purpose of going to a people group who would refuse to listen anyway. The Lord answered this issue with, "And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them." Ezekiel carried the message of the Lord but he was not responsible for its reception—he was responsible to make sure that the message was delivered (and to personally listen to the message and not rebel himself). Israel would be without excuse, for God had sent them His word.

⁹ Ezekiel is the only prophet to consistently be given the epitaph "son of man" בן אדם, literally 'son of Adam' (*Ben Adam*). The phrase occurs some 93 times in the book of Ezekiel. It essentially means "human being" or "mortal" (Numbers 23:19, God is compared with men who constantly change their minds while Isaiah compares God with the sons of men who are like grass).

Daniel also uses the term "son of man" in Daniel 7:13. This reference is the most unusual use of the term "son of man" as it references an eschatological figure. However, the language in Daniel 7 is in Aramaic and so, rather than *ben adam*, it's בַּר אֲנוּשׁ *Bar Enosh*. The distinction is important in the Gospels, for when Jesus referred to Himself as the son of man, He did so in the context of the eschatological figure in Daniel (Matthew 24:30; Mark 13:26, 14:62; and even Revelation 1:7). This distinction would have been easy to make for Jesus as He could have used the Aramaic term *Bar Enosh* rather than the more typical Hebrew *Ben Adam* to clarify who He meant to His listeners.

The term "son of man" does occur in Daniel 8:17 and is the only time another prophet besides Ezekiel is called the son of man. But once more the author switches from the Aramaic in Daniel 7 to Hebrew in Daniel 8:17, referring to Daniel as a mere mortal in a very similar sequence to what we see in Ezekiel 1:28b-2:1 (as opposed to the Son of Man in Daniel 7, who clearly was no mere mortal.)

¹⁰ Falling on the face in fear at seeing the glory of God seems to be an automatic response. Ezekiel falls on his face (Ezekiel 1:28; 3:23; 43:3; 44:4) but long before him, Abraham had the same response (Genesis 17:3). Others, such as Joshua, Daniel, Saul (Paul), and John fell on their faces (Joshua 5:14; Daniel 8:17; 10:9; Acts 9:4; Revelation 1:17) while Elijah hid his face (I Kings 19:13).

¹¹ The word for Spirit is רוּחַ *ruach* which also means breath in Hebrew. Modern Christian usage is to call the Spirit of God the Holy Spirit. The term Holy Spirit, as a term, only occurs three times in the Hebrew Scriptures and always with personal pronouns, for example David says; "Don't take from me *your* Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit was given a definite article 'the' in 2nd Temple period Jewish literature, the New Testament, and Rabbinic literature. The Scriptures most often refer to God's Spirit as the Spirit of God or simply Spirit.

¹² Ezekiel 1:12, 20 speaks of the Spirit going (ללכת) wherever it wanted to go and then in Ezekiel 2:2, 3:24 the Spirit comes (תבא) to Ezekiel.

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God also instructed Ezekiel not to be afraid. Even though rejection can hurt, God gives us the admonition against fear. Fear is the enemy of the gospel. Persecution does not stop church growth—it does the opposite. Fear, however, can stop us from doing anything. Fear of rejection can silence our lips from sharing; fear of opposition can keep us from going out and expressing our faith. God continues to tell us not to be afraid, just as He has done with His servant Ezekiel.

Psalm 123.¹³ Prayers and songs don't have to be long, Psalm 123 (with only four verses) is a good example of this principle that Jesus declared in Matthew 6:7-8.¹⁴ Psalm 123 speaks of scorn and contempt (something seen in the Gospel reading today) but also the focus of God's people should surely be on Him.

The ridicule of others can be very off-putting for us. It can bring us down emotionally, sapping our energy and can reduce our effort and desire to express God's will. Jesus identified with us in this feeling as the contempt He experienced in Nazareth greatly reduced His ministry there. Paul was also clearly affected by the Corinthians attitude towards him. Psalm 123 encourages the worshipper to look to the Lord for strength, appealing to God to be merciful and relieve the derision we experience. God is merciful, but whether He brings us relief from contempt or not, looking to the God enthroned in heaven rather than on those around us will also strengthen us—for in our weakness the power of God is manifest. "When I am weak, then I am strong."

II Corinthians 12:2-10. Paul was both an excellent orator and author. But here Paul chose to be quite cryptic, describing a vision (or possibly even visit) of heaven, but without giving any significant details. Many scholars, including many of the early church fathers, believe that the person who had the vision was Paul himself.¹⁵ Paul went as far as to say that, if he did boast, he

¹³ The author of Psalm 123 is unnamed and unknown. It is one of the 15 Psalms of Ascent, commonly thought to be sung by pilgrims going to Jerusalem.

¹⁴ Similarly, "The Gemara relates that a particular individual descended before the ark as prayer leader in the presence of Rabbi Ḥanina. He extended his prayer and said: 'God, the great, mighty, awesome, powerful, mighty, awe-inspiring, strong, fearless, steadfast and honored.'

Rabbi Ḥanina waited for him until he completed his prayer. When he finished, Rabbi Ḥanina asked him: 'Have you concluded all of the praises of your Master? Why do I need all of this superfluous praise? Even these three praises that we recite: The great, mighty and awesome, had Moses our teacher not said them in the Torah and had the members of the Great Assembly not come and incorporated them into the *Amidah* prayer, we would not be permitted to recite them. And you went on and recited all of these. It is comparable to a king who possessed many thousands of golden dinars, yet they were praising him for silver ones. Isn't that deprecatory? All of the praises we could possibly lavish upon the Lord are nothing but a few silver dinars relative to many thousands of gold dinars. Reciting a litany of praise does not enhance God's honor.'" Tractate *Berakhot* 33b.21-22

¹⁵ Origen, in his Homilies on Joshua, stated that Paul did not hesitate to describe what he saw in heaven because he did not understand it, but rather because it was not something for humans to know yet. "And

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would simply be speaking the truth. But, like Rabbi's of his time, what was most important was what Paul taught, what his disciples heard, and how Paul acted, what his disciples could see.

Paul not only spoke repeatedly of his suffering for the Corinthians and those he loved, but it could clearly be seen. Rather than broadcasting his experience, what he saw and heard in heaven, Paul returned to something he had to struggle with. Most of us have the tendency to hide our faults and rarely expose our deficiencies to the public. Paul described his vulnerability as a 'thorn in the flesh' and a 'messenger of Satan'. No one really knows what Paul actually meant by this. Once again, it's not like Paul lacked the words or the vocabulary to describe his 'thorn', nor who the messenger of Satan was, he simply chose not to elaborate. Whatever it was it certainly troubled him and he prayed to have it removed, but without relief.¹⁶

We can learn something through Paul's experience. Paul declared it was through that very weakness that he and many others saw the strength of the Messiah. Through his weakness, the strength of Messiah was manifested with power. As a man of faith, Paul could even say that he was content with being weak. This can be an encouragement to us all as we go through hard times. Sometimes in this broken world, God's best gifts are wrapped up in tragedy and suffering. It's not an easy thing to comprehend, but the truth is that Jesus overcame all darkness, weakness, sickness and strife to reveal His grace, mercy, compassion and love. When we are weak then he is most certainly strong.

Mark 6:1-13. The gospel portion is divided into two distinct sections. The first part describes the negative reaction to the ministry of Jesus in His hometown of Nazareth while the second part describes His sharing of His ministry with the disciples by sending them out two by two.

he not only saw but he also comprehended in the Spirit their reason, because he himself confesses that he had heard words and reasons. But what words? "Ineffable," he says, "and those that humans are not permitted to speak."

Unlike many mystics and gnostics, Origen did not recommend that we seek the same experience as Paul, rather Origen recommended that, "since we believe these things are divine and mystic, let us make ourselves worthy and fit for their spaciousness by our life, faith, acts, and merits, so that when we shall have properly understood them, we may also deserve to attain them in heaven by the inheritance in Christ Jesus our Lord." One day, we will attain this knowledge ourselves when we meet our God but in the meantime we should seek to live in a way that is worthy. (Quotations of Origen is from Cynthia White, *The Fathers of the Church: Origen, Homilies on Joshua*, Translation by Barbara Bruce)

¹⁶ Paul was able to heal others, but he was not able to heal himself. *Tractate Berachot* 5b is a reminder that, in Jewish tradition, the healing gift was for others and not to simply heal oneself. Paul with all his faith (and having had a vision of heaven earlier) and the many people he worked with (including the apostles and disciples of Jesus, who were also known healers) was never healed from his thorn in the flesh. Although, he also did not hesitate to ask for the thorn to be removed.

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Although Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Jesus grew up in the small village of Nazareth, in the north of the country.¹⁷

Jesus returned to Nazareth with His disciples. Disciples, at the time of Jesus, accompanied their teachers 24/7. Discipleship wasn't something you did a few hours a day or a few days a week, it was a total commitment and lifestyle. The home crowd did not know what to make of Jesus, he had departed as a carpenter but now returned as a teacher with His own disciples.¹⁸ The residents knew Jesus, there is no mention of Him being a disciple of a famous and learned teacher. And so the residents of Nazareth did not acknowledge Jesus as a great teacher or healer, even as He taught and healed those in their midst.

Joseph and Mary seem to have been very devout followers of God and seem to have taught Jesus as God had required of them (Deuteronomy 6). Jesus could discuss Scripture with the teachers even as a young man (at 12 years old) and He was able to read Scripture (and had memorized portions of Scripture). But the townsfolk labeled Jesus as the "son of Mary". There was no mention here of Joseph, although they do mention Joseph's other children. The gospels do not record the fate of Joseph, yet even if Joseph had died Jesus should still have been called the "son of Joseph".

Perhaps the rumours of his illegitimate birth had not gone away. So, in this context, "the carpenter, the son of Mary" was most likely a derogatory term—the saying, "familiarity breeds contempt" rings true here. Instead of enjoying the good teaching of Jesus or marvelling at the healings He performed, they were offended by him.¹⁹ Nonetheless, Jesus did teach and even healed a few in Nazareth and afterwards He went on to other places to continue teaching.

¹⁷ The allocation of the land under Joshua and the ancient tribal boundaries no longer existed precisely as they had since the exile and the return from Babylon. However despite the exile, genealogies and family lineage were still an important part of the Jewish culture. The Jewish people continued to retain their tribal affiliation and understood from which descendent of the twelve sons of Jacob they hailed from. Examples from the New Testament include Paul from Benjamin, Anna the prophetess from Asher and Barnabas the Levite.

¹⁸ Carpenter should probably be read as a handyman, builder, or worker in stone. In the north of Israel, many of the buildings were made of stone. Even some of the utensils were made of stone as they were said to not hold ritual impurity. The office of a Rabbi had not yet become a common thing in Israel in the time of Jesus, but many teachers (including the Pharisees) would teach. Some would even gather disciples who would learn everything they could from their master—and also see if their teaching and actions matched.

¹⁹ Recall that the last time the Bible recorded Jesus in Nazareth, it was after His time in the wilderness and He arrived without disciples, preached, and was nearly thrown off the cliff by the locals (Luke 4).

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Not only Jesus, but the gospel of Mark presents the sending out of the apostles as occurring almost immediately following His rejection at Nazareth.²⁰ The connection between the two passages suggests that there can be a positive response to rejection of the message of the Kingdom of Heaven. The response to rejection is further involvement in the work of expanding the Kingdom of God. The sending out of the disciples was recorded in all three synoptic gospels. In all instances, the disciples were commissioned in pairs and were charged not to carry too much equipment.

Serving God was not done alone—there was a teacher and there were co-workers sharing the good news. It also did not always require large amounts of money or preparation.²¹ However, disciples were not casual or occasional hearers. In its Hebraic context, the disciples (the twelve in Mark) heard Jesus. They obeyed Jesus and did as He commanded. They would have imitated His teaching—which was a message of repentance. And they would have even cast out demons and healed the sick even as Jesus had. Hearing Jesus is only one part of the story and something is seriously missing in the life of a disciple without learning how to imitate Him and then actually doing what He says.

Hebraic Perspective. Paul asked the question, does unfaithfulness (απιστια) nullify the faithfulness of God? Paul immediately and emphatically states, “By no means!” and yet Mark 6:5-6 states, “And He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. And He marveled because of their unbelief.” Mark seems to indicate that Jesus’ power and ability to perform miraculous works was limited by the unbelief (απιστιαν) of the people from Nazareth.²²

Throughout sacred history, God desired to partner with man in revealing Himself to the world. When we think of mighty works, one of the first things we may think of is the 10 plagues.²³ But the word for “work of power” is δυναμιν (dynamin). This word is used many times in the Exodus story, but it doesn’t refer to the miracles that God did: the plagues; the crossing of the sea; the thunderings on Mount Sinai—instead it always refers to one thing: The hosts of Israel God

²⁰ The narrative of the Gospels is not always in chronological order, even as the earlier Scriptures (such as Judges or Jeremiah) were not always in chronological order. This isn’t to say they are inaccurate. They were written by authors who had personally witnessed the event or the authors would go directly to eye-witnesses to interview them. They are finely crafted texts, written in a particular way to teach and guide.

²¹ Although Luke does point out that Jesus’ ministry was supported financially by certain women as they were able to (Luke 8:2-3).

²² From the passage itself we note that Jesus was in a synagogue. People gathered there because they believed in God and desired to worship Him, and yet they had no desire to see any good or potential work of God in Jesus.

²³ Certainly the Hebrew readers would remember the 10 plagues as the Psalmists often turned to them when speaking of the power and might of God.

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brought out of Egypt.²⁴ God has strength and power without people. He could have destroyed the Egyptian gods without Moses standing there with a staff. Jesus could have spread the good news to the world without the disciples—whether through angels or simply by speaking to the whole world at once. But God chose to partner with us and send us out into the world to declare His salvation. God delights to reveal Himself to man through man.

So no, our faithlessness does not nullify the faithfulness of God. Jesus certainly could still heal the sick in Nazareth despite their faithlessness. But if we aren't willing to become a disciple and be sent out perhaps there is a diminishing of the kingdom of heaven. After His rejection at Nazareth, Jesus engaged with the world by sending His disciples out with His authority and power. In Nazareth, Jesus healed a few people. But through His disciples, imitating and expanding the work of their master, many demons were cast out and many sick were healed. The good news is that rejection, weakness, and opposition in one place will not impede the growth of the Kingdom. Satan cannot (nor ever could) stop the spread of the Gospel, not even in Nazareth, from which James became one of the greatest of Jesus' disciples.

²⁴ In the Greek Septuagint translation popular in the time of Jesus: Exodus 6:26, 7:4, 12:17, 12:41; 12:51. Δυναμις (dynamis) is also used of other hosts, such as: the commander of the host of the southern Canaanites (Genesis 21:22, 32, 26:26) and the hosts of the Egyptians (Exodus 14:28, 15:4).