

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. *Amen.*

In my bible, the first chapter of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel is titled “The Vision of the Chariot.” Out of a stormy wind from the north came a great bright cloud with fire flashing forth continually. In the middle of it was something like gleaming amber and in the middle of that were four living creatures, of human form, each with four faces and four wings. The description continues in great detail, fantastic images that remind us of the Revelation of John. And finally it is defined for us: “This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. “When I saw it,” the prophet writes, “I fell on my face and I heard the voice of someone speaking.”

As we hear in today’s passage, the Lord tells Ezekiel to stand up on his feet so that the Lord will speak with him. And then comes the call. “Mortal, 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. I am sending you to them and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord God.” Now, Ezekiel was young, powerless, and ordinary. If he was so terrified by the vision of God that he fell on his face, we can only imagine how he felt when he heard what God was calling him to do.

It was a difficult time in the life of the Israelites. They had broken their covenant with the Lord and their exile in Babylon was their punishment. The Lord tells Ezekiel that they are impudent and stubborn. In the original Hebrew, they are described as having hard faces and hard hearts. Regardless of the words, it’s apparent that their hearts and minds are closed, and we are left wondering how this ordinary young man Ezekiel will accomplish what God has called him to do. There are no options given to Ezekiel, no choice but to obey God.

It’s a bit different for the disciples when they are commissioned by Jesus to do the same work they have watched him do. Perhaps it’s the context of his homecoming that makes the difference, the lessons Jesus learns as he returns to his home town. Remember that before their arrival in Nazareth, things have been going very well for Jesus and his disciples. The crowds that followed him were so great in number that he was forced to teach them from a boat. When the disciples feared for their lives during the storm on the lake, Jesus stilled the wind and comforted them. In the country of the Gerasenes, he healed the demoniac, and crossing back to the other side, healed the woman with the hemorrhage and Jairus’s daughter. Preaching, teaching, healing—Jesus is doing what God has called him to do and all is well...until he goes home. There the people who knew him as a child are condescending, openly disrespectful of him. Surely that was a low blow to his human ego! Mark tells us that Jesus was amazed at their unbelief.

Could there be a connection between the home folks’ reception of Jesus and our own hesitance to share with others how God is present in our lives? We don’t want to deal with similar critical comments about who we think we are when God is the authority in our lives. A year after my ordination I went home for my high school reunion, only five years since the last one. When my classmates learned I had been ordained, it was awkward. These friends I had known for most of my life honestly didn’t know what to say to me. They could easily ask others about their work as teachers or homemakers or lawyers or doctors, but they were not comfortable asking me about my work. Maybe they assumed that if they did, I might in turn ask them about their own lives of faith, a question that could put them on the spot. As it turned out, the whole encounter *was* a bit uncomfortable for all of us.

The sorry truth is that God is not present in the lives of everyone we know, and the subject of faith is taboo unless we are in the church or in some other religious gathering. Surely it was the same

way in Jesus' day, especially with his teachings about love and forgiveness and justice and fairness for all of God's children! So he says to his disciples, "dress lightly, take nothing with you. If you are unwelcome and the people refuse to hear you, leave, shaking the dust off your feet as a statement against them." He doesn't tell them not to go, but instead cautions them to "be prepared for whatever happens." "Leave your expectations behind." In essence, he is saying to them, "Don't worry about the outcome." And that's what God meant when he said to Ezekiel, "Whether they hear or refuse to hear...they shall know that there has been a prophet among them." What God wanted Ezekiel to know, and what Jesus wanted the disciples to know was that they would not be judged on results of their efforts. "Speak the word of the Lord." "Spread the Good News." That is your call; the rest us up to God.

Unfortunately, all of us have expectations about others, both positive and negative. We expect people to get on board with our opinions and reasons, and the sooner the better, and we also expect that they will not. I'm reminded over and over again that just because I say something doesn't mean others will buy into it. And I'm also reminded that the opposite is equally true—I don't buy into everything suggested to me. We are all unique human beings, with different emotions, and fears, prejudices and expectations, bound together because God made us and God loves us, and often that is the only way we're bound together. If Ezekiel or the disciples had expected their hearers to come agree with them without question, they would have been beating their heads against a wall after almost every encounter.

In our Stephen Ministry training several weeks ago, we talked about this very thing, about process versus results. An example given was that no matter how much we might want someone who is grieving to feel better, to be healthy, whole and healed, it will not happen simply because we want it to. But the process by which we help someone find their way to restoration of life does matter, whether it's someone in our care or someone we are introducing to Christ. Because it's in that process and through what we say and do that our Lord's love shines through. I am not always very good at that, and I'm probably not alone. We impatiently want things to happen instantaneously; we want what we want when we want it. But we must remember that one does not come to know God's saving grace simply because someone tells us about it. God's grace and love is always available to us, but it's through our response that we experience and come to know truly what God's grace and love is.

On this day when we hear about prophets and those who hear them, we might ask ourselves who *we* are today: are we prophets for our Lord, or are we those who hear them? What might God be calling us to hear that our rebellious hearts have not yet heard? What might God be calling us to say that someone's rebellious heart needs to hear? Can we simply give ourselves to the process and let God take care of the results?

A woman who worked as a clerk in a bookstore, arrived for work one morning and encountered a man dressed as a Hasidic Jew. After turning on the lights, she said, "Would you like any help?" "Yes," he answered softly, "I would like to know about Jesus." The woman directed him upstairs to the shop's section of books about Jesus and turned to go downstairs, but he called her back. "No," he said, "Don't show me any more books, tell me what you believe." "My Episcopal soul shivered," the woman said later. But she gulped and told him everything she could think of.

That's what we are asked to do as prophets for Christ, remembering first that we are not responsible for the outcome, only for the process. What is God calling us to do, to be, to speak? Are we faithful to that call? And at the same time let us ask what God is calling us to hear, to learn. Are we open to hear the message of our Lord, to be moved by it?

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*