

Our first lesson today, from Hebrew scripture, is one of our clearest examples of prophetic voice, which involves a human speaking a message from God. I'm going to ask you about YOUR prophetic voice today, about the message God asks you to share.

In today's lesson, God gave Ezekiel prophetic voice and instructed Ezekiel about what he was to say. God tasked Ezekiel to be God's sentinel. A regular sentinel is someone who stands guard, keeping watch for danger and warning the community. Instead of keeping watch, though, Ezekiel was to listen for God's voice and share God's message with the people.

This is a life-or-death mission with which God has tasked Ezekiel:

- If Ezekiel doesn't speak God's message telling people to change their ways, not only will those people die, unwarned, but God will hold Ezekiel accountable for their deaths.
- If Ezekiel speaks God's message of repentance and the people do not repent, the people will still die, but Ezekiel will not be held responsible.

In other words, the stakes were high for Ezekiel, as they are for all whom God gives his prophetic voice. But—we are told—God does not desire the death of anyone; his will for us all is life and relationship.

In Ezekiel's day, the people of Israel were the evil-doers, in a gentile kind of way. They looked and sounded like people of God, but their egos had led them astray. They had lacked regard for the poor, wresting every last bit of profit from their business dealings. They had been so sure that God would bless their nation that they had stopped paying tribute to Babylon and had looked to Egypt to save them.

Scripture makes plain that the people were in shock and grief in exile in Babylon, seeing no way back to their beloved homeland. They wanted their old life restored, but only restored in the same sinful ways that had gotten them exiled in the first place.

This reminds me of an alcoholic I once knew, David (may he rest in peace), who had been sober for three years but dreamed of getting healthy enough to drink again. This reminds me of me, when I had once quit smoking for five years but started again by managing to forget the cough and wheeze that awaited me.

In each case, David's and mine, we wrapped ourselves in our disease, doubled down on the illness rather than on the cure. So, too, the Israelites in Babylon thought going home was the cure, not recognizing that they had carried the disease within them into exile. As you may have heard said, "insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

Into this mess, God sent his Word via Ezekiel. At the time, Ezekiel was a priest, not a prophet, at least not a prophet until God gave him a prophetic Word to speak to the people. You may wonder why God gave his Word to Ezekiel to share and had not spoken directly to the people. I daresay God was beaming his Word to every Israelite in Babylon, but they were so damaged by their sin they weren't receptive to God's Word. See, being estranged from God is like a wasting disease, and being absent from worship on a prolonged basis gives us spiritual decay.

Yes, these people exiled in Babylon had a terminal spiritual disease. But God intervened by sending Ezekiel as their sentinel to speak repentance. Unlike humans, God doesn't stand idly by, even when those in distress choose to abandon God. For God, the only "just" outcome is salvation.

Nine years ago, as part of our 50th anniversary celebrations, I invited the Rev. Dr. Frank Wade (a noted preacher and our neighbor at Goodwin House Alexandria) to preach here at Church of the Resurrection. I gave him the near impossible task of using today's lessons to preach God's Word about our church's future. I chose the day—Welcome Home Sunday, the Sunday after Labor Day—I didn't choose the lessons.

Frank told us in 2014 that there is always a Word from God, something God has spoken to us that needs to be shared. In 2014, Frank Wade suggested that an apt summary of God's Word to us is that "life is meant to be lived generously outward, not selfishly inward." Frank didn't know that, in 2014, we at Church of the Resurrection had spent a year discerning our future, discerning God's Word for our future, and we were readying ourselves to do whatever was necessary to do what we had heard God calling us to do. In fact, just four months after we listened to Frank for God's Word to us about our church's future, we set an overarching goal for ourselves of making a "go/no go" decision about redeveloping our property by September 30 of the following year.

In 2023—now that our "exile" has been over for two-and-a-half years, now that we are back in our Promised Land, now that we have listened for and discerned a new mission—we are busy sharing God's Word with our neighbors as we build community here in this place. We are striving to live generously outward, instead of selfishly inward, as Frank Wade's prophetic voice encouraged us to do. We share food, diapers, and hygiene products as we create "beloved community" here in the West End of the City of Alexandria. But are our neighbors aware of THEIR need to live generously outward for others instead of living just for themselves?

Many of the ills we face today as a nation are the result of people from all across the political spectrum living only for themselves. We don't have to read much of the daily news to find prime examples of our national greed. I started to list a few examples, but sermons are supposed to be Good News. And the Good News is this: We don't have to be caught up in our culture's ills. Instead, God demands that we turn from OUR ways and choose life rather than a living death.

So, too, for our neighbors, those around us here on Hope Way and around us in our home neighborhoods. Our neighbors need to choose life and we need to tell them the Word that God has given us to share.

Let me give you a few hints: God's Word isn't "vote." God's Word isn't "wealth." God's Word is "love."