

Strong Words vs. Hard Hearts

In the name of him who called the twelve and sent them out to preach that people should repent, dear friends in Christ: That Jesus did that was nothing new. The Lord has been in the business of sending men to proclaim his word for a long time – really, since the very beginning. And in today's Old Testament lesson, we have the Lord's call to Ezekiel to become his spokesman and prophet specifically to the exiled Judeans languishing in Babylon. They were one profoundly unhappy group of people. Recall that they had been involved in an attempt by the nation of Judah to free itself from the control of the Babylonian Empire which dominated all the nations of the near east at the time. In response to this rebellion, the Babylonians cracked down hard. It failed miserably. And as part of the punishment for their disobedience, some fifteen thousand citizens of Jerusalem and Judah were uprooted from their homes, and driven like cattle eight hundred miles to the east. They were resettled in what amounted to penal colonies in the land of their captors.

These the Babylonians selected for exile were for the most part from the upper level of Judean society: the land owners, the businessmen and merchants, the skilled craftsmen, those who were the most highly educated, all the brightest and best. They were the people who were looked up to, who were used to giving orders, and who knew how to organize things. The thought was take these people away so that those left behind would be easier to control and less able to organize an effective rebellion in the future.

What that meant for the exiles, though, is they went from being the top of society to the bottom. They went from being managers to field hands, from administrators to ditch diggers, and from having servants to wait on them to doing all the things the servants used to do for them – under much worse conditions. And don't imagine for a moment that the land the Babylonians assigned them to scratch out their existence was anything that could be considered prime real estate. It wasn't. So just staying alive was an enormously difficult task for the exiles.

On the spiritual side of things, there was an even bigger issue they had to contend with. They had been kicked out of the Promised Land – the place the Lord had sworn to give to Abraham and to his descendants as their lasting inheritance. They had been taken away from the temple, the one place on earth where God located his gracious presence, where he dwelt in the midst of his chosen people. They were cut off from the worship life of the community, from the religious festivals, and from the sacrifices by which their sins were forgiven. They wondered if in this distant land God could even hear their prayers because to them, it sure didn't seem like it. They felt the Lord had rejected them and cast them out like the garbage. And to a certain extent, they were right.

For many generations the prophets had been warning the people of Judah of this very thing. The Lord said he was tired of their constantly turning from him to worship other gods, of their sexual immorality, of their corruption of his holy laws, of their rigging of the justice system, and of their wicked oppression of the poor and needy. He said if you keep acting like pagan Gentiles, I'll send you away so that you can live with the pagan Gentiles. To be sure, this was the reason the Lord put the nation of Judah under Babylonian domination in the first place. It was meant as a means of discipline to make their lives hard and miserable so that they would see their sin, repent, and return to the Lord. Instead, they rebelled against the Lord's discipline.

So in the end the Lord was left with no choice but to spank them harder, so to speak. Thus the exile, and thus the terrible circumstances in which these people found themselves.

I would like to report that this extreme means of discipline to which the Lord was forced to resort had the desired effect, that in their hardship it finally got through to the Judeans in exile that they should repent of their sins and return in their hearts to the Lord. I'd like to say that; but I can't. No, instead the exiles complained that it wasn't fair. We're being punished for the sins of our forebears, they cried. They did worse things in their generations than we were doing. Besides, if they had raised us better, if they had taught us right, we wouldn't be in this mess. And why were *we* the ones taken? There are plenty of folks who were left behind back there in Judah, who get to stay fat, dumb, and happy in the Promised Land who are worse sinners than we are. It's not fair. The Lord isn't just. Why is he picking on us?

The answer is because whom the Lord loves he disciplines. As we heard in last week's reading from Lamentations, he does not willingly afflict his children, but in love he does what is necessary to crush their sinful pride and break their hard hearts so that they will repent, turn to him, and live. Even in the exile, the Lord had not abandoned his people. And he wanted them to know that he still loved and cared for them. That's why he called Ezekiel to speak his word to them, to tell them how things really are, to get them to see the truth about themselves and all that had happened.

Our text comes from chapter two of the prophet's book, but to make better sense of it you should know that the entire first chapter describes Ezekiel's vision of the Lord appearing to him in the land of their captivity. I don't have time to go into the details, so I urge you to read it for yourself sometime this week. It's fascinating stuff. The bottom line is this: the Lord appears to Ezekiel mounted on a massive, chariot throne. It's upheld by four giant cherubim whose appearance is as of fire, and who have (it seems) wheels instead of feet, wheels that can turn in any direction. The angelic beings have wings too so that the Lord's chariot can fly as well as roll on the ground. The point is that the Lord isn't bound to the temple in Jerusalem. He can make his gracious presence go where he wants it to. And right now he wants it with his people in the exile.

This glorious vision of the Lord so overwhelms Ezekiel that he falls down on his face – which is the proper posture for a sinner in the presence of the holy God. He lies there in terror, afraid to move; almost like a dead man. And that is the key to understanding what follows: The Lord by his word kills and makes alive.

Witness what happens: The Lord *speaks* to Ezekiel "Son of man, stand on your feet." "Son of man" is the Lord's favorite way of addressing Ezekiel. It's a phrase that emphasizes the prophet's weakness and sinfulness. It says you are a son of Adam, an inheritor of his sin, subject to the curse; mortal – you will die.

And the thing to see here is that though Ezekiel has been commanded by the Lord to stand, he can't do it – not with his own power and strength anyway. But look what it says: "As he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet." The Lord's word is powerful. The Spirit accompanies it. And together the word and Spirit enable Ezekiel to do what he could not do otherwise. He is raised up to stand before the Lord. And the only way that's possible for a sinner to do in the Lord's presence is if he has been forgiven, absolved of sin, restored, and made new – which again is precisely what God's word does: it kills the sinner and makes alive a new man.

And having been made new, the Lord gives Ezekiel his mission: “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. Their descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord’.”

Note that Ezekiel isn’t sent to the world at large, to nations of unbelievers sitting in spiritual darkness; but rather to the Lord’s chosen people, the people who already have the light of God’s word – and sadly, have been ignoring and rejecting it. The Lord refers to them as “impudent” and “stubborn”. Actually the Hebrew is “shameless of face” and “hard of heart”. That is to say, they are unashamed of their sins, they have no sense of their own guilt; and they are tenaciously resistant to the Lord’s word and Spirit. They hear what God says, but they categorically refuse to listen.

Ezekiel’s call is to speak the Lord’s word to such people. That is his duty, and he must do it. But he is not responsible for making anyone receive it as they should. The Lord tells him, “Whether they hear or refuse to hear ... they will know that a prophet has been among them.” When the people of God hear his word, they know where it’s coming from. And they can allow the word and Spirit to do their work on them, or they can dig in their heels and resist it. Either way, they must acknowledge the source of the message.

We see the same thing in today’s Gospel lesson. The people of Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth are astonished by his teaching. They know they are hearing the word of God, but they reject the messenger and his message just the same. They take offense at him – almost certainly because he told them things about themselves that they didn’t want to hear: that they were rebellious, shameless of face, and hard of heart. And their rejection of him proves it.

But back to Ezekiel. His name, not coincidentally, means “God makes strong” or “God hardens”. It’s the same Hebrew word that describes the hard hearts of the people, so there is something of a word play in the text. God by his word has strengthened or hardened Ezekiel to perform his mission, which is to speak God’s strong, powerful word to those with hard hearts. And when that word is spoken it either strengthens the hearers to stand before the Lord as it did for Ezekiel, or it hardens their hearts against it. It has an effect either way.

The question then becomes what effect will it have on you? Let me spell this out: like Ezekiel, I have been called to speak God’s word not to the world at large or to those unbelieving sinners out there, but to you, you who are chosen by God. And you acknowledge that the words I speak are the Lord’s, not something I made up. And God’s word is strong. It’s powerful. The Holy Spirit accompanies it and he does his work through it.

And let’s face it; let’s tell it like it is: You are in exile. You have been driven out of the Promised Land of Paradise and placed in hard circumstances, a world in decay and full of evil – because of your sin, your placing of things before the Lord in your heart, your evil desires, your corruption of justice, your lack of care for those in need. And like the people in exile, you are rebellious, shameless of face, and hard of heart. Like them you want to make excuses for your sins, blame your upbringing or circumstances, point out the supposedly worse sins of others. I know because I’m with you in this. Like Ezekiel, I’m in the exile too. And I’m here because of my sins and nobody else’s. The Lord’s strong word kills and makes alive. Or it hardens hearts against it. What will it do with you?

I’m happy to report that for many of Ezekiel’s hearers, God’s word ultimately had the desired effect. Through the prophet’s message and their continued hardships (which got worse

before they got better) they were at length forced to admit their own guilt and God's justice in sending them into exile. The Spirit and word brought them to the death of repentance – the killing of the sinner within. Then they cried out to the Lord to save them. And he did. He forgave their sins. He raised them up in faith. And though it took several years, the Lord fulfilled his promise to restore them. He resettled them in the Promised Land. He gave them back the inheritance they had lost through their rebellious disobedience.

In the same way may God's strong word always do the same for us. Rather than resist it, let's confess its truth and allow it to crush our hard hearts so that it attacks and kills the sin nature within. Then and only then can the word and Spirit raise us up through faith in Christ, Christ who loved us and gave himself for us that we might live in him in holiness, righteousness, and purity here in time and forever in eternity. May God grant it to you for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!