

July 8, 2018 – Ezekiel 2:1-5 & Mark 6:1-13

When you think of the word “missionary,” what comes to mind? Maybe a fearless evangelist braving the wild jungles of Africa, Asia, or South America. Maybe a loving pastor caring for the poor and homeless of some urban wasteland. Maybe a church planter, finding those remote areas of the country and the world where the Word of God still isn't being preached.

Frankly, that's exactly what comes to my mind when I think of the word. And it was for that very reason that I took a short term mission trip during my second year of seminary. Because, like many of the men training for the ministry, I too had that secret curiosity about what going into the mission field would be like.

I knew being a missionary was hard. I knew it wasn't a task for the faint of heart or the weak of faith. I knew all the stories of grueling hardship and persecution and, sometimes, even death. But, at the same time, there's also a certain nobility to being a missionary. Almost a kind of glamor, at least among pastors. And I wanted a taste of that.

And so, when the opportunity arose to spend a week working in Guatemala City, I jumped at it. I mean, here was everything I thought of missionary work in a nutshell. Urban ministry in Central America for a LCMS mission that had no pastor. How could you get more missionary than that?

And the trip was pretty much everything I had hoped for. We went door to door in a shanty town, sharing God's Word. We served soup and bread to the poorest of the poor outside of a city dump. We offered Bible studies to hundreds of adults and children. It was amazing.

And when it was all said and done... I had absolutely no desire to be a missionary. My curiosity had been satisfied. My comfort zone had been thoroughly exited. And I was ready to come right back to good old midwestern Lutheran Word and Sacrament ministry. And thanks be to God, He agreed.

The funny thing is, though, that looking back on it, I'm not sure I was taking the easier of the two paths. Oh, foreign mission work is hard. Don't get me wrong. It is physically taxing and spiritually draining. It carries risks we would never dream of experiencing here in America.

But it also carries rewards we would never dream of experiencing here as well. A couple years ago, I heard a series of lectures from Pastor Mandla Khumalo. Pastor Khumalo is the founder and senior pastor of St Peter Confessional Lutheran Church of Middleburg, South Africa. And in the last thirty years or so his church has baptized over 26,000 new Christians. One Lutheran congregation baptizing, on average, almost a thousand people every year, for thirty years in a row.

So tell me, who has the harder task? The missionary who goes to a foreign land where the Bible has never been preached and where it is received eagerly and enthusiastically, such that thousands upon thousands are seeking Word and Sacrament? Or the pastor who goes to central Missouri, where God's Word is taken for granted and ignored? Where it falls on hardened hearts and bitter souls? Where it is choked daily by luxury and apathy and temptation?

I think Ezekiel knew this lesson well. We read in our Old Testament lesson: *“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.”*

Sounds like quite the challenge and quite the mission field. Except that this wasn't a “mission” field as we usually think about it. Ezekiel was being sent to his own hometown. God was telling Ezekiel to go... right here. Right where he was standing.

You see, Ezekiel was in Babylon among the other exiles of Judah taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar. And for the first time in two hundred years, God was not sending Judah a prophet to warn them of impending doom if they did not turn from their sin.

No, God was sending a prophet to tell them, “This is what our sin has brought us. This is what our stubbornness and rebellion has caused. Separation from all that we knew. Separation from the presence of God Himself. We did this. And now we're suffering the consequences.”

You can imagine how popular that message was. And yet, despite the harshness of the message, Ezekiel has a fair amount of success. The people respond to him. And I think it's in part because of that second half of the lesson, *“I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.”*

There's surprising comfort in those words. Because even though they were separated from Judah and Jerusalem and the Temple and everything that assured them that they were God's people, they still had one thing: God's Word. God was still speaking to them. And hearing those simple words, “Thus says the Lord God”... that was a message of hope. They were rebellious. God had not abandoned them.

We are a rebellious people. We like to make stereotypes about “rebellious teenagers” and such, but in God's eyes, we're all rebellious. When God looks at us, he doesn't just see rebellious teenagers. He sees rebellious 30 year olds. And rebellious 50 year olds. And rebellious 70 year olds.

We're obstinate and stubborn. God says, “Worship,” and we sleep. God says, “Give,” and we keep. God says, “Go,” and we stay. God says, “Stay,” and we go. God says, “Be holy,” and we sin. Over and over again, we sin. We are obstinate and stubborn. We do things our own sinful way. And we rebel against the one who made us.

We've always rebelled. From the Garden of Eden to the Children of Israel to the people of Nazareth. And no matter the prophets who came to us, we wouldn't listen. Even when God Himself came to us in the flesh.

Jesus came to His own hometown and faced rejection. He came into that which was His own. But His own would not receive Him. No, in their stubbornness and rebellion, they crucified Him. In our stubbornness and rebellion, we crucified Him.

And for that, we are rightly punished. But this time, God isn't messing around with war or exile. No, the wages of sin is death. Death in this life. Death in the next. Death eternal. That is the punishment for our sin. I wish I had better news than that. But like Ezekiel, like Jesus, I too have a message to deliver to my neighbors. A harsh message of repentance for my own people.

But you know what? There's hope in this message too. Because if I'm going to say to you, “Thus says the Lord God,” then I also have to tell you what the Lord God did. Because the death He died was not a death forced upon Him. It was a death He took willingly, so that we might not have to. And the resurrected life He now lives, He lives not just for Himself, but for us. That we might live as well.

The Lord God that we killed, lives today. And He still speaks to us. He still comes to us, His rebellious people. In Word and Sacrament. In the washing of water and giving of His own Body and Blood. In the promise that all is forgiven and His return is near.

The Lord God still speaks. And we still have a message to deliver. Yes, not “I”. “WE.” We have a message. Because we are all Jesus' disciples. Sent out two by two to go and preach repentance. To say to a rebellious people, just like us, “Thus says the Lord God.”

We are missionaries. But we don't have to go far. The 12 disciples just went to the villages nearby in Galilee. They didn't go into any wild jungles. They didn't brave any urban wastelands. They didn't even plant churches. They went to their own hometowns.

To their children and grandchildren and nieces and nephews. To their friends and their neighbors and their coworkers. They went to the waitress at their favorite restaurant. And to the neighbor boy who mowed their lawn every week. They went to the people they knew.

And yes, they faced rejection. *“A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.”* Jesus wouldn't have told them to shake the dust from their sandals if He didn't expect them to face rejection. But the text says, they also encountered great success. They drove out many demons. They healed many people. They preached repentance to many. And many repented.

I don't expect to ever baptize 26,000 people like Pastor Khumalo. But I don't need to. If I know that the people of this area have heard what the Lord God says to them, then I will have been a missionary. You will have been a missionary. And we will have succeeded in our mission. Amen.