

Speaking By Sacred Authority

Ezekiel 2: 1-10

Matthew 8: 5-17

Authority is empowerment. When you have authority, you can get things done.

As a part time teller at Regions Bank, I had no authority. None. For the slightest irregular thing, I had to find someone, anyone, with some level of authority to approve it. The woman who was a full time teller next to me had authority to a certain level. Then there was a young man who was my supervisor, and another woman who had been a head teller previously, who had the next level of authority. Then there were certain items that required the authority of the assistant branch manager or the manager. In other words, everyone had some level of authority except me. I had none.

Then one day in, like, March, a fee waiver came up – a whole \$8 to get a customer a certified check. I called to Traci, the woman who had been a head teller, and told her I needed a fee waiver approval. She said, “Oh, Bruce, I think you can do that. Try it and see.” I was shocked. I thought, ‘Whaaat, I had been given authority? ME?’ I tried it and it worked! Clearly Traci had gotten some memo, which was another thing you never get as the part time teller: information about anything meaningful. You get the circulars and some notices in email, but that was standard stuff, or stuff I’d never be dealing with. But anything of real significance, like a change in **my** authority, **that** was something I’d **never** hear about.

From that magical day, I had authority. It wasn’t much. I could waive small fees. I could approve cashing a check for a customer who was shy of the covering funds in their account. I had greater value and ability as one with authority. I could make things happen. And so I quit. That’s another story.

Like I said, authority is empowering; you can make things happen.

We find in scripture that when God wants to make things happen, like communicating to God’s people, God will call someone and authorize them to go with God’s message. We’ve done call stories before, but I don’t think we’ve ever done the call story for the prophet Ezekiel. If you thought that Isaiah’s vision of God filling the Temple was a great call story, you should check out Ezekiel’s from the beginning. He has quite a vision indeed.

Ezekiel is part of God’s people in exile in Babylon, even though he had been in Babylon before the Babylonian invasion. His opening vision is on a par with the book of Revelation. You get a giant fire, four creatures, each with four different faces and four wings. They appeared like burning torches with fire and lightning moving between them. Each one had a sparkling wheel with rims full of eyes. And on and on it goes.

Until finally, there is the voice from a sapphire throne, the image of a man who, from the waist up, was in glowing metal like it was full of fire, and brilliant light like a

rainbow around him. The text says: *This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw, I fell face down, and I heard the voice of one speaking.*

Now comes our selection: *[The Lord] said to me: "Son of man, stand up on your feet, and I will speak to you." And when he spoke to me, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet; and I heard him speaking to me.* That opening expression, "son of man," is one to remember. It's the first time we encounter that expression "son of man" in the Bible. You realize it's a term of special identification and authority that Jesus uses to describe himself. Jesus uses it in the context of the vision of Daniel 7 – a whole sermon right there ... for another day. The author of Daniel is uses this term first used in Ezekiel's vision right here, and employs it within Daniel's vision. Ezekiel uses this term "son of man" throughout the work to refer to the prophet in his sacred calling and authority.

In the very next sentence, "the Spirit" begins to play a role. You'll remember in Ezekiel 37's vision of the valley of dry bones that the Spirit will be summoned by the son of man to breathe life and resurrect the dead. The son of man and the presence of the Spirit are in close connection. Notice also that the Spirit didn't come over and give him a hand up. The Spirit enters him – *came into me* – and brings the one who has been visited to his feet.

Next come marching orders: *Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites.* These are God's people, but these are **not** God's favorite people right now. God has already sent the Babylonians on them like a plague, and their best and brightest have been carried off into exile. As Sovereign over all nations and empires, God has in effect cast out God's people from their Promised Land, much as God cast out Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden for their rebelliousness. God thinks they should have learned their lesson, but God also has a long history with these people. That has God in a rather sour mood.

God proceeds to carry on about the rebellious-ness of God's people, who seem to do nothing but rebel, and who have rebelled since, like, forever, I'm sending you to them. Oh, *and* they're obstinate and stubborn as well as rebellious. *And whether they listen or refuse to listen - for they are a rebellious house - they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.* God doesn't want any of those rebellious, stubborn, obstinate people to say that God didn't give them the message, that God held anything back, or that God didn't send someone fully authorized. They must recognize and understand that **a prophet**, one called by God to his ministry and given the message of God for God's people, has come among them and spoken God's word to them.

But these people, God's people, they think they're all that. They can quote scripture, talk trash, put on the fine robes and big tassels, get all self-righteous, dismiss you like an insect, and **then** they can get mean and ugly, threaten you and menace you, and set snares and be deceitful, and make your life a living hell. The text says: *And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns are all around you, and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or terrified by them, for they are a rebellious house. You shall speak **my***

words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house. Doesn't this sound like a fun mission?

Having realized that this guy Ezekiel is *himself* one of those rebellious people, God feels compelled to say: "*But you, son of man, **listen** to what I say to you. Do not be rebellious like that rebellious house. Open your mouth and eat what I give you.*" *I looked, and a hand was stretched out to me, and a written scroll was in it. He spread it before me; it had writing on the front and on the back, and written on it were words of lamentation and mourning and woe.* "Lamentation and mourning and woe." Again, what a fun mission this will be. And Ezekiel proceeds to eat the scroll as God's word is made one with him.

Ezekiel is commanded and given authority, given God's word which God already knows is not going to be received well. God's people, despite having been cast out, apparently have yet to learn what God is all about and what God expects from them. The prophet will have his hands full. In fact, Ezekiel seems to get a progress report in the next chapter or so. It seems like he hasn't been delivering God's word with the kind of power that's needed. God gives Ezekiel a word of advice: either do the job right and deliver the word, or I'll take my wrath out on you, too. That helps clarify things, doesn't it?

Turning to the story in Matthew of the Roman centurion who has a paralyzed servant suffering painfully, the centurion must have known about Jesus. Jesus had set up shop in Capernaum, so it seems likely that someone involved with security in the city would be familiar with Jesus and his movement. Yet what he's heard about Jesus gives him reason to approach the rabbi. Of course, Jesus is a Jew, and one of those holy fellows at that. Good holy Jews don't interact with unclean Gentile Roman officials. Yet the centurion steps right up and asks Jesus for help.

The servant is paralyzed and in great pain, so there seems no way to **bring** the servant to Jesus. The centurion must have known that it would be very problematic for a holy Jew to enter a Gentile household since a Jew would be made unclean; he must have known this when he asked Jesus. But shockingly, Jesus says, *I will go to him*, even though it would certainly mean entering unclean premises. This would be a great story with a great lesson right there. But we aren't done yet; there is more to tell.

The centurion admits that he wouldn't ask this, saying: *Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof*. Not only does the centurion know about the purity issue, he also understands **grace** – *Lord, I do not deserve* Being a Gentile, outside the covenant of God's people, he knows how he is regarded, yet Jesus is something really different.

The centurion goes on to show that he *knows* Jesus is really different. He says Jesus can simply speak and heal his servant. This is great faith, yes, but it's a whole lot more. In most every healing that Jesus performs, the person is brought to him or he goes to the person. Only here does he heal by verbal command from afar. This kind of

action – verbally commanding something into being – is most memorably found in the first Creation Story when God speaks, “Let there be ...” and then there it is.

All that talk about being one “under authority” has nothing to do with faith *per se*. The centurion is likening his authorization from his superiors to take care of affairs in his area to Jesus. What the centurion realizes – that many around Jesus don’t, even his disciples – is that Jesus is under authority from God to take care of affairs in **his** area, that area being God’s creation. Affirming that Jesus has such authority and such empowerment, the centurion knew from the beginning that Jesus did not need to go into his residence; he simply needed to speak and make it happen, just as God had spoken to bring about creation. Jesus was fully authorized and empowered to act on God’s behalf, just as the centurion was empowered to act on Caesar’s behalf.

Jesus is stunned by this affirmation of faith from a centurion, from a Gentile, who has so correctly, precisely, recognized his mission in the world. He has not gotten this from Jews, from Jewish leaders, or frankly even his disciples, all who should get it.

Jesus goes on to identify such awareness of his sacred mission and his sacred authority as those who will join Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the messianic feast in the Kingdom at the end of the age. He may be a Roman centurion, a Gentile, who has no heart or spirit for Torah-Law, much less any desire to be circumcised, but he, and those who believe like him, will dine with the Jewish patriarchs.

Yet the Jews, rejecting Jesus and his sacred authority and sacred mission, will have no seat at the table, and will instead be cast out, cast into the outer darkness, exiled to a new Babylon for those who kept being rebellious toward God and God’s will.

Of course, nothing has changed. God’s people remain a rebellious people today. They are proud in their self-righteousness, dedicated as religiously pious, but they are a rebellious house that rejects God’s word of justice, peace, and compassion. They deny sacred authority, preferring idols and ideology over gospel and grace. They applaud their priests and pastors who either speak fraudulence, or just as bad, say nothing at all. Ezekiel was told that there would be dire consequences if he behaved in such a way. Dire consequences indeed.

May we have the insight and wisdom of the centurion. Believing he was an outcast, he came to Jesus, recognizing his sacred authority, realizing that this one could do what no other could do. This was one with compassion, with a spirit of service to those in need, with a heart of generosity and grace, with the power to make all things good, to restore to people the promise that was always there, waiting to be awakened and freed so that it might be fulfilled. It was not a mean, cruel, nasty, or indifferent gospel that he brought, but the promise of new life for all. For all. Even and especially for those who had been cast out and deemed unworthy by the powers that be. Those with sacred authority must share the promise of new life for all. And we are all authorized to share the word of God.