

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

THUS SAYS THE LORD!

Ezekiel 2:1-5

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

1He [YHWH] said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. 2And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. 3He said to me: 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. 4The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord GOD." 5Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

DIAGNOSIS: Hearing unto Death

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Mortal*

Even if it sounds irreverent to say so, God has a communication problem; doubly so. On the one hand, "the people of Israel" (God's chosen, to say nothing of the rest of us) are "rebellious" and "transgressors" and "impudent" and "stubborn." Not just "refusing to hear" because they don't like what they hear or don't want to hear but, as it turns out, unable to "hear" altogether. On the other hand, the one or ones whom God sends to "speak" for him are themselves "mortal," that is, equally as rebellious and unable to hear as the ones to whom

they are sent! A real problem, not only for God but for all creation; for, without a solution, all we are left with is the ambiguities of experience. This problem, mind you, is true with or without any written “word” from God. In either case, we are unable to “hear” it as from God. We will always twist the words into sayings or meanings of our own liking that justify ourselves to ourselves. And if we should suppose that there is a God, we use “his” words to justify ourselves before him as well.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Idol Factories*

It is not that we mortals are dumb—hearing-wise or otherwise, but we just don’t “get” what God is saying to us; not deep down. We don’t appreciate (or trust) God’s words in their full meaning and purpose. We are unable to “hear” God’s words because we don’t have “the spirit” (not “a” spirit) for it. We are not plugged in; it is simply not in us. The “spirit” that God gave to Ezekiel was not a liberating gospel-like spirit but rather a command to speak on behalf of YHWH, the God of Israel. By this “spirit” from God, even if in our vanity or humility we should call it the Spirit of God, God’s words are invariably taken as temporary chastisements or excuses which we turn into self-justifications. Without Christ to bear God’s “law” against us, we do not hear the fullness of God’s judgments against us. As a pseudo-protection against these judgments, we always presume that the only way around the law, is for us to justify ourselves by it, that is, for us to become demigod creators, or “idol factories” as Luther put it. To save ourselves from the demands of the law, we are left to trust in ourselves, that is, in gods of our own making.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Without Mercy*

That leaves us to face YHWH, the God of Israel, on our own. But since we know through the law that we are never without God, God is not “for us” but “against us.” Even the so-called “spirit” we thought we had to justify us before God proves in the end to be

an insufficient help, indeed an accomplice of the law. In sum, God is against our constant self-justifying idol-making which defines our existence before God. Thus, apart from a new, saving word or promise from God: whenever we are faced with “Thus says the Lord,” the only word we have from God (externally, internally, eternally—that is, whatever makes us creatures before our Creator) is an inescapable accusation: rebellious, transgressors, impudent, stubborn. The result of this judgment, apart from an additional word from God to save us, is certain death.

PROGNOSIS: Hearing unto Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Merciful Word*
Against all the foregoing, and against even God’s own word of judgment, comes God’s incarnate Word of Promise: the crucified yet merciful Jesus of Nazareth. This Word, which is mortal flesh of our flesh, comes in the power of the Holy Spirit to bear upon himself what we cannot bear. In Jesus’ crucifixion and death, God comes to bear not only our rejection of God (otherwise called sin) but God’s own judgment against us (otherwise called death). By the invincible power of the Spirit of God, Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, in turn, is God’s merciful promise to us that it is now possible, as in a new creation, to bear God’s judgment and yet live. The life that overcomes death is life-in-Christ (otherwise called eternal life). The Word (henceforth, “Thus says the Lord [Jesus Christ]”) that now comes to us with the Holy Spirit, as God’s solution to his own deathly law, is the forgiveness of sin: “I, Jesus of Nazareth, forgive you.”

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *“Jesus Christ is Lord”*

Eternal life in Christ is the end of sin’s dominion over us, that is, the end of God’s deathly law and participation in God’s

new creation in Jesus Christ. Who are “we” to proclaim this new word of God to all the world? We are creations of the Holy Spirit who are “alive” eternally by faith in Jesus Christ alone. In fact, our faith and the Holy Spirit are indistinguishable. Against all old creation evidence to the contrary, against even death itself, we have no greater assurance than that our lives are forever connected to Christ crucified and risen. On this basis and in this Spirit, we are authorized to proclaim for all the world to hear: “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Immortal Mortals*

By faith in Christ, our death is just as behind us as Christ’s death is behind him, and we now live in the promise of our resurrection in him; and because the promise is immortal, so are we. If I may put it so boldly, our mortal bodies have not yet caught up to our faith; they are still on the front lines of battle. Yet with these bodies we, like Ezekiel and Jesus, declare the words of God in the midst of a dying world, and suffer the rebellions of sin along with our neighbors. Now it is for them that we suffer, perhaps even unto death. As immortal mortals in the power of the Spirit, we can do this because God himself is faithful in his Word.