

Hillcrest Congregational UCC
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
7-5-09
Two by Two
Ezekiel 2:1-5, Mark 6:1-13

Today's scriptures both have to do with commissioning. Ezekiel and Jesus were commissioned as prophets by God, and the disciples by Jesus to teach, preach and heal. I find the word commission interesting.

If we break down the word we have: com as in with, and mission. A person who is commissioned, or given a commission is given a task or a duty, a mission to accomplish. They are given a responsibility but with that responsibility also comes the granting of power to carry out the mission. They are officially empowered, given a mission with authority to carry it out.

But in the case of our stories today, I think there is something even more important that takes commissioning to a higher level. Let's start with Ezekiel 2: 1.

Ezekiel is experiencing God's presence. It may be a fantastic vision, or it may simply be the language of poetry and metaphor. Either way, Ezekiel's point is that he is in the presence of God and he falls on his face. God says: (verse 1) "Mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you."

God doesn't wait for Ezekiel to stand up. A spirit enters Ezekiel and sets him on his feet. God then gives Ezekiel his commission: "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. The descendants are impudent and stubborn." (some translations say stiff necked, or stiff hearted- I don't know anyone like that do you?).

If I were Ezekiel I might wonder, "Why does God bother? Why give them another chance? Why not find somebody who will obey?" Then the realization comes, Oh yeah, God is loving and forgiving and keeps God's covenants, right?!

But God is still speaking, so Ezekiel better listen to hear what he is supposed to do "You shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord God." That's it. In this periscope (this section of scripture for today), we don't get to hear the whole message of what Ezekiel is to say, because that is not the point. Instead, our reading ends at verse 5- "Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they shall know that there has been a prophet among them."

In our reading from Mark, we hear the same message. Mark 6: 4 "Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.'" The scripture says the people wouldn't listen to him- "who does he think he is- he's just a carpenter! He is one of us, not something special.

Then in Mark 6: 11 Jesus tells the disciples "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet..." Both God and Jesus acknowledge some people will not hear at all. It seems not being heard is a common hazard for a prophet.

But remember I said I thought there was a deeper importance to the word commission- even more than a mission with authority? God told Ezekiel what is heard is not as important as the people knowing that God has sent a prophet to be with them. You see, a prophet does not preach their own ideas. Their words have the authority and power of God.

In contemporary terms if a representative of our country were assassinated on a diplomatic mission, it would be considered an act of war against our whole country. Prophets

and ambassadors do not go as themselves, they go as the embodiment of what they represent. In the case of the prophets, commissioning means that God is with them in their mission: it is God speaking, empowering and embodied within them. If the people refuse to listen, if they reject prophets, it is much more serious than ignoring a person. They are rejecting God.

Jesus invited the disciples to go on a mission with him- to take his teachings about God's love with them. Jesus anticipated that he could not go and be everywhere, and would not always be physically present. He knew that the message he lived and taught about God and God's love, was too important to be limited to the ability of one person to teach it. He empowered the disciples, and commissioned them to spread the good news, while he was alive.

But then, both God and Jesus give some sage advice- it doesn't matter whether they listen or not, don't take it personally. Ezekiel is told it doesn't matter if they listen or not. Jesus tells the disciples, shake the dust off your feet, do not take with you the despair, disbelief, power of doubt, negative feelings you have from an encounter with people. Don't let the situation distract you from what you are sent to do. Don't let them drag you down with them. In both cases, success is not the criterion or measure of the faithfulness of Ezekiel or the disciples. They are simply to go, and speak, and do, and be with the people.

And we who are disciples of Jesus, we who worship the same God as Ezekiel, have also received a commission from God. God has called on each of us to accomplish a mission with our lives and in our life here as a church, with God. But, as I have worked with many congregations, I have noticed similar things, even though the churches have been quite different.

There is a feeling of disillusionment, perhaps even some despair. It goes like this: "You see Pastor, some of us are older, the congregation is smaller than it was, the energy level is low. We are old, tired, worn, church activities are for younger people. Children are the future, if we don't have young people we won't survive.

But the question is, what about the present?! God put us here and gave us 70, 80, 90, 100 years. So what are we to do- when we get old and tired and some parts don't work like they used to- close up shop? We don't have any children or young people- so, what are the rest of us? Chopped liver?

I also hear, well we don't have many talents or abilities. We have a little choir, only a few of us cook, most of us don't sew, none of us know how to teach Sunday school. I have one thing to say - Look at the people called by God in the Bible- Moses stuttered, Paul had some physical impediment, and Jesus was only a "carpenter" to those who thought they knew him.

So what are we to do? Sit home and wait for others to go and tell the story of Jesus and his love? Of God's great forgiveness? Of the amazing things that the spirit can and does do?

I know that Jesus didn't sort through his disciples and say: Okay, you're not a gifted public speaker, And you're short, And you can't cook, And you can't walk long distances, And you don't do well in crowds, And you have no experience with children, And you are old, and you are very young, And you have never healed anyone, And you don't know enough to teach, And your prayers are a little shaky, And you have never been out of the village so you'll get lost, And you don't know the ways of the world you won't have much credibility. So never mind.

I would guess that among the 12, or the 70 sent two by two there might have been one or two who weren't all that "qualified"? What were their qualifications? Jesus' whole ministry was 1 to 3 years long. Remember the people that Jesus first called were fishermen. They didn't get a doctoral level course in theology. They did not do a year of internship or residency. They did not write theses. They did not get to spend time learning how to be Sunday school teachers. Some of them probably couldn't sing a note or even read!

But the message that Jesus gave them, and the love of God empowered them. They became filled with the joy and spirit of spreading the good news, even when people would not listen. And God invited Ezekiel to go on a mission - God was already going to be there. Ezekiel could participate and co-create with God. God empowered Ezekiel to go and serve God's people, and the disciples were empowered by Jesus, so that the people would know that God was with them.

And this is what we are called to do. Jesus has recruited us, God has empowered us, and we are commissioned to go with God. We do not need to be "young" and multitalented. We do not, and can not wait for the church to grow and flocks of new people to flood in the doors. We have to show up with what we have to serve God. God will use us, God will go with us, God will empower us.

Ezekiel and the disciples were never alone, God was with them, but Jesus did send them two by two. We might speculate why: safety, perhaps matched gifts and abilities, perhaps for accountability and support, perhaps companionship. I invite you to find a partner to talk to about this. What might God be able to do if each of us individually, and we all together as a church, accept the invitation, if we show up, if we bring what we have. What might God want to do here at Hillcrest with us, just as we are now? A very important and poignant question we can ask ourselves is, what would we be willing to try, if we knew we could not fail?

Remember that "success" is not the criterion or measure of faithfulness. We are simply to go, and speak, and do, and be with the people. Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they shall know that someone sent by God is there, and through us they will know that God is there with them. Amen.