

"A LESSON FROM THE LIFE OF EZEKIEL"

INTRODUCTION

Today is Universal Bible Sunday. It's always celebrated on this Second Sunday in Advent. I could spend my time in the pulpit this morning praising the Bible for its comfort, its beauty, its guidance, reminding you that it is still the world's best seller, so far outstripping all other books that there really is no comparison. However, instead of talking to you about the Bible, I would much rather let the Bible talk to you and with this thought in mind I would turn to the Old Testament, to the book of Ezekiel, to the second verse of the second chapter where we find the following words spoken by the prophet Ezekiel: "And the spirit entered into me, and set me upon my feet".

DEVELOPMENT

Ezekiel certainly needed that experience. He had been a youth in Jerusalem when the Babylonians had swept into the city, utterly destroying it and carrying the most important citizens to exile in Babylonia. And there he was, an exile amid the oppressive splendor of his conquerors, his own people uprooted, dejected, and discouraged. And something happened to Ezekiel that put his name into history. He became one of the major creators of the new Judaism, helping to make possible at last the return from exile, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the beginning of a new era in man's spiritual life. "The spirit entered into me" he said, "and put me upon my feet".

There are two aspects to the relationship between ourselves and the world. On the one hand, there is what we do to the world; on the other hand, there is what the world does to us. There are times when our emphasis is on the first: we go out happily to do things to the world. But the time comes to all of us, as it came to Ezekiel, when the situation is reversed: the world takes the initiative and does things to us. Trouble, antagonism, disaster confront us, and the question that becomes dominant in our lives is whether or not we can stand up and take it.

No man escapes situations where all of his chances of positive, creative living depend not alone on what he can do, but on what he can stand. This is something that appears to be woven into the pattern of human life. Handel experienced it. He always enjoyed hearing portions of Handel's Messiah at this time of year, but let me read to you a few lines written by his biographer:

"His health and his fortunes had reached the lowest ebb. His right side had become paralyzed, and his money was all gone. His creditors seized him and threatened him with imprisonment. For a brief time he was tempted to give up the fight - but then he rebounded again to compose the greatest of his inspirations, the epic Messiah"

So whether or not "The Messiah" was going to be written hung in the balance there, teetered on the thin edge of doubt, until, in what looked like a hopeless situation, the Spirit entered into him and set him upon his feet. What he could do depended on what he could stand.

This story has been repeated many, many times, so that Ezekiel is a parable for all of us. All around him his exiled people were lying

down and going to pieces. And who could blame them. Lost faith, lost hope, lost morale were everywhere, until there arose in the midst of those exiled Jews another kind of character. "The spirit entered into Ezekiel, and set him upon his feet". This morning we take it for granted that we would like to have a share in such stamina. Our instinctive admirations go out to it. ~~You may feel the need for it at this moment.~~ We wonder what is it that goes on in the life of a man who needs it? Let me suggest four things.

I. TACKLED HIMSELF

For one thing, a man like Ezekiel certainly started by tackling himself. He could never have tackled that difficult situation as he did if he had not first of all tackled himself. He had sessions with himself.

To be sure, long centuries separate him from us, but with regard to the matter we are thinking about, time makes little difference. We know Ezekiel well. He had every alibi a man can have for cracking up and giving in. What kind of a crazy, hopeless situation was that for a young man to face? He had hours of self-pity when he felt extremely sorry for himself. He had moods of resentment when he rebelliously cursed the world and the day he was born into it. He had hours of bewilderment when he could not see a step ahead and in his bafflement cried out, what's the use? He had moods of discouragement and despair. Who does not know what went on inside of Ezekiel? But something else too, went on inside of him and again a voice cried: Nevertheless, you can play the man: stand up and take it.

We admire such a person. We admire people - plain, ordinary, undistinguished people - who can take the worst that life can hand out and still come up smiling. A minister recently asked a surgeon how, in his experience, people face suffering and death. A surgeon ought to know. He thought for a moment and then answered: "Most of them act like heroes". Call it sportsmanship if you will. It's one of those things that fine sportsmanship teaches. Deep in human nature there is a magnificent capacity to play the game of life heroically.

You and I are products both of our heredity and our environment. However, this must be added. Even when heredity and environment have done their utmost to a man, there still remains in every one of us this strang capacity to take what heredity and environment have done, to answer it, to make our individual response to it, to meet it with a distinctive rejoinder of our own, to stand up to it and do something with it. I think we can be sure of this then that Ezekiel started by having sessions with himself. Even victorious Babylon and his exiled people could not furnish an alibi for himself. Therefore, let us look to ourselves. Many a man blames the world at large for his collapse when the real trouble is within himself. For the ultimate hope of the world is in individuals who reproduce an old experience: "The spirit entered into me, and set me upon my feet."

II. HE SAW THAT A DIFFICULT SITUATION..

A second thing I am confident happened in Ezekiel is that he saw that a difficult situation can positively call out a man's powers - educe from him capacities and faculties that pleasant and prosperous situations never demand, and so never produce. You might say that he saw that he could become a real man, not despite the exile, but because of the exile. It has been said that real men and women are like trees on the Maine Coast - the south wind warms them, the sunshine

nourishes them, the northeast gales strengthen them, and the winter cold toughens them. All kinds of weather go to make them.

One way or another we must take it. There is no escaping. And time and again it comes down to this whether within ourselves we are of such stuff, such quality that the more trouble comes, the more our powers are called into play; the more difficulty rises, the more dimensions we discover deep in our character; the more life demands stamina, the more stamina rises to meet it. This sort of thing happens on the athletic field. The harder the game, the tougher the opponent, the more strength, the more daring, the more skill it pulls out of a competitor and releases onto the playing field.

See then what Ezekiel must have done within himself. He shifted the center of his life to a place where the difficulties he faced did not unmake him, but actually proved to be the thing that made him. If a man is primarily after wealth, the world can whip him. If a man is primarily after ease and pleasure, the world can beat him. But if above all else a man wants to be a man, then he can capitalize on almost anything that happens to him. Remember the words of Sir Thomas Brown, the Christian physician: "LIVE UNTO THE DIGNITY OF THY NATURE AND LEAVE IT NOT DISPUTABLE AT LAST WHETHER THOU HAST BEEN A MAN!" Let any person start with that desire paramount, with that thought first and foremost in mind, and you can be sure that the northeast gales will strengthen his roots, and that the winter cold will toughen his fiber. And everything that happens to him will leave him more of a person than he was before, and like Ezekiel he will be that person because of the challenge he has had to face. No wilderness, no Moses. No exile, no Ezekiel. No cross, no Christ! The great souls have had their powers called out and into play and their deep resources tapped by the very troubles they have faced.

III. GOD WAS NOT DEAD. Nevertheless, we have not told the whole story when we have said that the prophet tackled himself, and saw that the troubles could call out his powers. Ezekiel believed that whatever happened, God was not dead.

You and I live in an age when a cautious skepticism seems to be the thing with a great many people. The God that was so real to their parents and their grand-parents is not a living and a breathing reality in their lives. They find it difficult to believe in a higher power - to believe in the unbelievable, in the unseen. The people of Ezekiel's time found it difficult, too. But Ezekiel did believe, and it made the difference. And the world, time and again, has been saved in a pinch by those who have believed - in the unbelievable and the unseen.

We recall the days when our forefathers here were trying to build a united nation when it seemed impossible. A little over 150 years ago, in 1787, Nathaniel Gorham, a delegate from Massachusetts rose in the Constitutional Convention and said: "CAN IT BE SUPPOSED THAT THIS VAST COUNTRY, INCLUDING THE WESTERN TERRITORY, WILL ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS HENCE, REMAIN ONE NATION?" It seemed impossible to them...as impossible to the men of that time as a world free from the tensions and troubles of the cold war seem to people of our own time. Then, as always, in a pinch, the situation has been saved by those who have believed in the unbelievable, the impossible.

I think we can be sure of this going back to Ezekiel that when the spirit entered into him and set him upon his feet, he had caught a fresh vision of God and his purpose for his people. The vision of God, you could say, made him realize that he belonged to something greater than himself, and he believed in that something. For him, God was not dead, but very much alive and at work. You and I need to be challenged to such a faith today. It is desperately needed. The weight of history and human experience rests on our side, when in the face of overwhelming difficulties (personal or otherwise), we can go on believing in the unbelievable because we believe in God. ~~And it may be that one day people will look back on us thankful that we did not give up or give in, or lose our faith, if we only let the spirit enter into us, and set us upon our feet!~~

IV. ONE FURTHER THING

There is one further thing that should be brought but here in this experience, and that is simply this: this thing that happened to Ezekiel was not so much something that he did, as something that was done to him. The spirit entered into him. He did not get it alone by thrusting his volition after it, but by receiving it. He was played out, done in, all gone, and lo! in an hour of spiritual receptivity he opened his life to a power greater than himself that gave him new life.

The danger in a sermon like this is that it should seem to some an appeal simply to their wills. Tackle yourself! it says. Let trouble call out your powers. Believe in God and his purpose. True as all this is, this is something that we do, and for all of our own efforts it can be ineffective unless and until it comes to its fulfillment in an inner receptivity - an awareness of available resources from beyond ourselves, as though the sea at high tide poured in and filled a bay, in a way the bay with all of its own effort could never fill itself. Ezekiel did not set himself on his feet. He was set on his feet by a power greater than himself.

This is what our religion should do for us. The basic reason why men and women let down on life instead of standing up to it is that within themselves they run out of power. This ability to stand up and take it is a power question, to be sure, and power is not something we get merely by blowing on our hands and willing it, but by opening ourselves inwardly to spiritual resources greater than our own, and appropriating them. The spirit can enter into us. It can set us upon our feet. And if it should happen here this morning in some discouraged, defeated life, it would be worthwhile for us having come together in this place, this hour. Let us bow our heads and pray that it may happen.

PRAYER: Help us, O God, to be sensitive to thy spirit in these moments. And help us to go about our ways in life knowing that thou art always with us. Increase our capacity for seeing the things that are invisible. Give us the confidence to trust where we cannot see. We ask this in the name of him through whom men have come to see thee better, and by whom we are led into Thy holy presence, even Jesus - our Lord, Master and Friend. Amen