

August 17

Ezekiel 12-14

You will remember from our reading yesterday that we are experiencing the second vision of the prophet. At the conclusion of Ezekiel's second vision he tells the other exiles what he has seen -- the glory is departed! And he waits. Soon enough, the word of the Lord comes again. Ezekiel is told to pack up his belongings in the daylight as though he were going into exile. Then in the evening, while the other exiles watch, he is told to dig through the wall, cover his face and carry out the luggage as if he were going into exile.

The word for wall here is not the word for a city wall which a) he couldn't have dug through by himself and b) he wouldn't have been permitted to dig through, but it is the word for a house wall. Ezekiel dug through the wall of his own mud brick house to enact this mime.

The acted out parable, of course, was a visual depiction of what was going to happen back at Jerusalem when Zedekiah tried to escape through the wall of the city and break through the Babylonian lines to escape. He was captured and brought to die in Babylon just as Ezekiel so graphically prophesied. Remember, Ezekiel is in Babylon with the second wave of exiles in 591 B.C. The final exile including Zedekiah is coming in 5 years - 586.

What the account pre-supposes is that after Ezekiel's previous enactments --lying on his side and once a day weighing out his meager food supplies, there was a very widespread awareness of whatever this Son of Man -- this prophet of God did. The people apparently watched him very closely so that when he brought out his baggage there were at least several people watching who spread the word to the whole settlement: "Come and see. Ezekiel is at it again." This prophet of God must truly have lived in a kind of public fishbowl. Once again, here as before, the explanation is do this and foreshadow what I am going to do so that when it is done they will know that I am the Lord.

After Ezekiel plays out his little drama, the Lord says they will come to you and ask what is going on. Explain it to them, he is told to tell them, "I Am a sign to you."

Now there is a sense in which that is a very good description of what God's messengers in every generation are to be. God gives to us a message to bear but much more pointedly, He calls us to be the message as well. Just as certainly as Jeremiah and Ezekiel were signs to their generations, we also ought to be signs to ours. That is what Jesus meant in the Sermon on the Mount when He said you are the light of the world -- a city set upon a hill cannot be hid -- you are the sign.

In light of the fact that Ezekiel's audience is already in exile, it seems a bit strange they would have a problem believing him. That is the nature of man. We always seem to listen to those who are telling us what we want to hear rather than the ones who are telling us the truth!

It would appear that for every true prophet of God there are a half dozen or more false prophets. They tell people what they want to hear and they never tell the truth about sin and repentance. They promise wonder cures and deal in magic powers -- health and wealth are always high on their agendas. They promise them as gifts to all who will follow them. They major in short-cuts to heaven. God says, "They lead my people astray saying 'peace, peace when there is no peace and when a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash."

These words from Ezekiel 13 find echoes in the sayings of Jesus who evidently had meditated on this prophet as he did all the others.

The message of God through Ezekiel is that even though other religious teachers say it's all going to be o.k. and paint a rosy picture with whitewash thrown over plywood and cardboard walls, he is going to judge them all and the judgment upon the false prophet who leads people to destruction by teaching lies in the name of God is going to be a fearful one.

The last thing I want to point out has to do with the device that Ezekiel uses to explain just how wicked the society God was about to judge had become. It is the device of using the names of Noah, Daniel, and Job. Here were three of the most righteous characters in the whole Old Testament and God says this society is so evil that not even the presence of Noah, Daniel and Job would make a difference here.

Here is the point though. Righteous people do make a difference in society. They influence others -- God uses them. But there is a point at which individuals and societies get so far from God that no one -- no matter how godly they are can influence them any longer and when that point comes -- judgment quickly follows.

I hope you are one of those righteous points of influence. May your life be a sign - just like Ezekiel's - that always points people toward God.