

Ezekiel 2:2-5

He said to me, “Son of man, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you.” ²The Spirit entered into me as he spoke to me and brought me up to my feet. Then I heard him speaking to me.

³He said to me, “Son of man, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to disloyal nations, who have been disloyal to me. They and their fathers have rebelled against me to this very day. ⁴These children of mine are brazen-faced and hard-hearted. I am sending you to them, and you are to tell them that this is what the LORD God says. ⁵Then, whether they listen or do not listen—for they are a rebellious house—then they will know that a prophet has been among them.

Success

I.

How successful will they be?

It’s about that time of year again. Call Day came in May, when they found out where they were being sent. July is the typical time of year when those new graduates from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary are being ordained and installed as pastors into their first call in the public ministry.

Success. How do you define it? How do you identify it? How do you recognize it? Perhaps you can look at popularity and fame. How many FaceBook friends a person has; how many YouTube followers; or perhaps you can look at how many re-tweets their pithy sayings might achieve. It’s common for someone who posts on social media to check back frequently to see how many “likes” they have garnered.

Success isn’t just a popularity contest. It’s also about money.

I once knew a man who owned a successful business and lived in a very nice home and drove fancy cars. He had lots of toys, too—snowmobiles, four-wheelers, boats, motorcycles, and motorhomes. Then, one day he was brought up, and later convicted, on charges of fraud. His whole image of success was a carefully crafted facade.

Some legitimately successful people take a different approach. Elon Musk lives in a 375 square foot \$50,000 home which he rents from his company, SpaceX. Famous investor Warren Buffet clips coupons and often dines at McDonald’s. Buffet once used a coupon when paying for the dinner he had with Bill Gates. Those who are successful often got that way by being frugal—and their frugality doesn’t go away.

How does one measure success in the church? Does a sprawling complex of massive buildings indicate a successful church? Maybe it’s multi-million dollar budgets that indicate the level of church success. Perhaps it’s all about attendance—those churches that are bringing in the crowds are obviously successful, right? Another measure of success is to have a lead pastor who is a published author.

II.

It’s Call Day. He’s listening for the information about where he is going. His name was announced. Ezekiel. God called him “Son of man.” “Son of man, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to disloyal nations, who have been disloyal to me. They and their fathers have rebelled against me to this very day. ⁴These children of mine are brazen-faced and hard-hearted” (Ezekiel 2:3-4, EHV). He could tell right away that his ministry as God’s prophet wasn’t going to be an easy one.

Brazen-faced, hard-hearted people who were disloyal to God. Great. How successful would he be?

Ezekiel, of course, couldn't look ahead to the ministry of Jesus. Jesus was the prophet that was called greater than Moses, who was considered the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets. Yet Jesus says in today's Gospel: "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own house" (Mark 6:4, EHV). They didn't honor Jesus as the greatest prophet. They didn't listen to him at all. "[Jesus] was amazed at their unbelief" (Mark 6:6, EHV). Could you say Jesus was unsuccessful? Could you say Jesus was a failure? Lots of people didn't believe the message he brought at all.

In the Second Lesson for today, Paul talked about his thorn in the flesh. During his ministry, Paul had to be reassured by Jesus: "My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9, EHV).

Ezekiel would need to learn the same thing every new pastor has to learn—the same thing every member of a congregation has to learn: God's idea of success is not the same as ours.

III.

"I am sending you to them, and you are to tell them that this is what the LORD God says. ⁵Then, whether they listen or do not listen—for they are a rebellious house—then they will know that a prophet has been among them" (Ezekiel 2:4-5, EHV). Ezekiel was to preach God's Word. He was to announce "this is what the Lord God says." Success was not to be determined by whether the people listened or not. They were, after all, as God described them: "a rebellious house." Ezekiel was to be faithful and diligent in preaching.

Today's hymn of the day is one that many of you probably aren't familiar with. It's a favorite of mine, even if it isn't that well-known. It was written by a Missouri Synod pastor and professor, Martin Franzmann.

1. Preach you the Word and plant it home

To those who like or like it not,

The Word that shall endure and stand

When flow'rs and mortals are forgot. (Christian Worship, 544:1)

This is what Ezekiel—and every pastor—is supposed to do. Preach the Word of God to people. Some won't like what God has to say. Their thumbs down responses aren't really responses to the pastor, but to God. God's Word, as Franzmann says, will still be there after the unbelieving human being is long-gone.

2 We know how hard, O Lord, the task

Your servant bids us undertake:

To preach your Word and never ask

What prideful profit it may make. (Christian Worship, 544:2)

God knew exactly what he was asking Ezekiel to do. He knew it would be difficult. He knew Ezekiel would have to use strong language, some of the most blunt in the Bible, to preach God's Law to the people. But Ezekiel would also preach the gospel.

"He said to me, 'Son of man, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you'" (Ezekiel 2:1, EHV). The verse before our text begins God's call of Ezekiel. God told Ezekiel to get on his feet to receive the call from the Lord.

But then: "The Spirit entered into me as he spoke to me and brought me up to my feet. Then I heard him speaking to me" (Ezekiel 2:2, EHV). Again and again Scripture tells us that human beings aren't worthy, in and of ourselves, to meet with God. We aren't *able* to

come to God of our own volition or desire. After telling him to stand up, God himself *lifted* Ezekiel up to his feet to prepare him to hear about his new and difficult call.

God promised to be with Ezekiel. Again and again, throughout the account of Ezekiel's call in chapters 2 and 3 God tells him not to be afraid of the people. Ezekiel reports: "The Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and so I went...and the hand of the LORD was upon me with power" (Ezekiel 3:14, EHV).

IV.

God's prophets today are simply people who announce God's Word to others. Pastors and teachers are called by the congregation to do this as their daily work, but every Christian has opportunities to speak God's Word to people.

3 The sower sows; his reckless love
Scatters abroad the goodly seed,
Intent alone that there may be

The wholesome loaves that people need. (Christian Worship, 544:3)

Don't be afraid. Keep speaking the Word. Your primary motivation is that you know people *need* to hear both Law and Gospel. They *need* to hear that they have sinned and that God does not tolerate sin. They *need* to hear about Jesus—that he lived as their substitute, never sinning once, as he took their place to live perfectly. They *need* to hear that he died as the innocent sacrifice to pay for all the times they *did* sin.

Some people don't like to hear that God gets angry. They don't like to hear that he doesn't just smile and laugh knowingly as he overlooks their mistakes. Some don't like to hear that Jesus did *everything* to accomplish salvation. They want to be part of the plan. They want to participate.

It isn't the job of the prophet—whether the full-time preacher or teacher, or the regular Christian—to *make* them believe.

5 Preach you the Word and plant it home
And never faint; the Harvest-Lord
Who gave the sower seed to sow

Will watch and tend his planted Word. (Christian Worship, 544:5)

God wants us to be faithful in the telling of both Law and Gospel. *He* will do the work. He will bring results as he sees fit. God grant you success. Not the success of numbers, for the numbers are totally and completely in God's hands. Rather, God grant you the success of remaining firm in your faith to the end, and of sharing that faith with others. Amen.