

CALLED TO TRUTH

Ezekiel 2:1-5

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

July 4, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Old Testament lesson for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost comes from the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 2, verses 1 through 5. Here God calls the prophet Ezekiel to declare the Word of the LORD. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Ezekiel 2, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ And he said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you." ² And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. ³ And he said to me, "Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. ⁴ The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' ⁵ And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The key phrase in this Old Testament lesson is, "Thus says the Lord GOD" (2:4). This was Ezekiel's call. Ezekiel was called by God to speak to the rebellious people of Israel. He was called to speak the Word of the LORD to them. And he was called to present it boldly. He was not called to say, "I think what you are doing is wrong." He was called to boldly declare, "Thus says the Lord GOD."

This is the only phrase God gives to Ezekiel at this point. There will be more specific content that the LORD gives to Ezekiel after this. But from the start, Ezekiel is to know that the words he speaks to the people of Judah are not his own. They are the LORD's words, and the LORD expects them to be presented as such. "Thus says the Lord GOD." If Ezekiel takes the Word of God and presents it as his own humble opinion, the people will not know that they are rejecting the LORD when they reject Ezekiel. But Ezekiel is called to make plain that he is speaking the Word of the LORD. The people are to know that a prophet has been among them. Therefore, by rejecting his words, they are really rejecting the Lord GOD.

Ezekiel was a prophet of Judah during the time of the Babylonian exile. He was a priest (1:3), so he was among the important persons who were taken as prisoners to Babylon. God raised up Babylon to discipline Israel. They had chased after other gods. They had committed injustice. And they were unrepentant. So God sent Babylon to discipline them. And while Ezekiel was among these exiles in Babylon, God called him as a prophet. His calling was to speak the truth and say, "Thus says the Lord GOD."

As Christians we are called to truth. We are called to be lovers of the truth. We are called to hear and believe the truth. We are called to speak the truth. And we are called to live by the truth. We are called to be people of the truth.

This means submitting to God's authority. We've been talking a lot about authority lately. And my primary goal has been to emphasize that God's authority is good. He uses his authority for our benefit. Really, the Church is always talking about God's authority. I've just been more intentional about using the word. But whenever the Church is speaking faithfully, we are always talking about God's authority. Everything God does is the exercise of his authority. God exercised his authority when he created the world, and Jesus continues to exercise this authority by upholding the universe by the word of his power (Heb. 1:3). He exercised his authority when he took on human flesh to suffer and die for us, and he exercises it when he declares forgiveness to us. He exercises it when he protects and preserves us in body and soul. And he exercises his authority when he commands us what we should believe and how we should live. Everything God does, and everything God says, is his exercise of authority.

The kind of authority we're talking about is not a domineering abuse of authority, but a gracious and even sacrificial exercise of authority. This is the pure kind of authority. When you think of authority in the world, you might think of the abuses. And those are not hard to find. But this is more like the authority that good parents exercise for the benefit of their children. And I can only say that it's like that, because even good parents are merely a dim reflection of God's pure and perfect authority.

So for us to submit to this authority means that we receive God's service, we believe what he says, we obey his commandments, and we receive forgiveness when we violate those commandments. To live under God's authority is what it means to have a God. This is First Commandment stuff. The LORD says, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). And what does it mean to have a god, but that we "fear, love, and trust in God above all things." Remember those three verbs: fear, love, and trust. That's what it means to have a god. To fear him means that we recognize his power and authority. To love him means that we obey what he commands. And to trust him means that we learn that he uses his power and authority for our good. It also means that we learn that he loves us far more than we could ever love him. We expect to receive good from God's hand continually. God's authority over us is always good.

Being called to truth means submitting to God's authority. God is the source of all truth. If anything is true, it has its origin in God. And whatever God speaks or whatever God does is, necessarily, true.

There may be other things we want to believe. There may be other things that actually seem better to us than God's will. But submitting to God's authority means that we abandon our own judgment of what is true or false and right or wrong, and accept God's judgment.

This is a difficult thing to do. We don't want to accept the things we don't like. This is obvious, right? It's hard to accept the things that challenge us or contradict us or convict us or call us to change. We don't want those things to be true. And especially, when we think our judgment is morally superior, it is difficult to change.

We create God in our own image. What I mean is, we construct our own thoughts about God based on what we believe to be right and wrong. We do this naturally. If we value a certain thing, we project that value onto God. So when challenged by a differing viewpoint, we think, *I just don't think God would do that*. We take our values and our beliefs and we fashion a god out of those things. This is not submitting to God's authority. Rather, it is subjecting God to our authority. But in order to submit to God's authority, we actually have to go against the way we think. And this is painful. But it is good.

I've experienced this before. You can't go through seminary without having your falsehoods challenged. But, at the time, I didn't know them to be false, so it was a difficult experience. And

this happened with a few issues. A professor, or sometimes a classmate, would assert something that I did not like. It didn't seem like the god I had constructed in my own image. So those things challenged me. And it was usually a fairly long process. On some things it was a number of years before I changed my mind. But the way it worked was that I still didn't like the truth presented, but I could no longer avoid what Scripture plainly taught. So there was always this uncomfortable period when I knew something to be true, but I still didn't like it. But eventually I came to recognize that the truth was really better than the falsehood I had previously believed. I couldn't recognize this on the other side. On the other side, the falsehood I believed seemed better to me. But once I had been corrected, I eventually came to see that the truth was better. Most of these things have been points of doctrine. And these points where I was corrected, struggled, and eventually changed have now become the most precious points of doctrine to me, because I have experienced both sides of them.

This is what it means to submit to God's truth. And I don't mean to set myself as a positive example of submitting to God's truth. I was dragged into it while I uttered all kinds of lies and vain opinions. My point is to say, when Scripture challenges you with something you don't want to believe, don't fight it. It might seem wrong. It might feel wrong. It's okay to be uncomfortable with the truth. Accept it, even if you're hesitant about it, and keep learning about it from the side of truth. Accept the truths Scripture confronts you with, and then explore them from the positive side. I expect that you will come to realize that the truth Scripture teaches is really better than the so-called truth we find in our own hearts or in the cultural whims of the day.

And it's not just a matter of saying, "God said it; that settles it." That is true. If God says something, that does settle. That's what, "Thus says the Lord GOD," means. But we don't have to stop there. If God said it, that settles it, and we should want to explore it so that we can understand and rejoice in God's truth. In the end, submitting to God's truth is joyful and liberating.

One of the challenges to this is the current American mindset. We live in a land of freedom. I'm not going to argue against that, especially not on Independence Day. The First Amendment guarantees the free exercise of religion. This includes, but is not limited to, the right to believe and worship as we see fit. In my opinion it is good for a civil government to allow this freedom. That's about as much of my opinion as I'll give you, because my opinion is not a "Thus says the LORD" thing. But what do we do with this freedom? That's always the question with freedom. What do we do with it?

This freedom can actually have a negative effect if we think that we have absolute freedom to believe whatever we want and we don't have to answer to anyone. That is not freedom, but autonomy, and autonomy does not really exist. We still have to answer to God, the source of all truth.

Lord Acton said something helpful in this regard. I know it's kind of weird to quote him in a Lutheran Church, because he was Roman Catholic. It's also weird to quote him on Independence Day, because he was British, but his words are helpful. He said, "Liberty is not the power of doing what we like, but the right of being able to do what we ought" ("The Roman Question"). That, for Christians, is a helpful way to understand our political and religious freedom. We should use our earthly freedom to believe and do what God has commanded.

As far as the state is concerned we can believe whatever we want. But as far as God is concerned, we must believe and live the truth he has revealed to us.

The United States allows us to believe there are many gods or no gods. It allows us to believe that all paths lead to heaven or that there is no heaven at all. But we should use our freedom to believe Jesus when he says, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”** (John 14:6). Thus says the LORD.

The state allows us to believe whatever we want concerning Baptism and to administer it however we see fit. We should use our freedom to believe the Scriptures when they teach that **“Baptism saves”** (1 Peter 3:21), and that this promise is for all people, including children (Acts 2:38-39). Thus says the LORD.

The state allows us to believe whatever we want concerning the Lord’s Supper. We should use our freedom to believe Jesus when he says, **“This is my body,”** and, **“This is my blood”** (Matt. 26:26, 28). Thus says the LORD.

The state allows us to kill our children up to a certain age. This is the greatest injustice in the world today. We should use our freedom to believe, **“You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb”** (Ps. 139:13), and, **“You shall not murder”** (Ex. 20:13). Thus says the LORD.

The state allows a husband and wife to divorce each other for any reason and almost entirely abandon their children. We should use our freedom to believe, **“They are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate”** (Mark 10:8-9). Thus says the LORD.

The state allows us to believe that we are superior to other people who may not live as well as we do. But we should use our freedom to believe, **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift”** (Rom. 3:23-24). Thus says the LORD.

The state allows us to purchase items for as little as we can and sell other things for as much as we can. There is a certain amount of cheating or even fraud that the state allows. But we should use our freedom to **“Keep [our lives] free from love of money, and be content with what [we] have”** (Heb. 13:5-6). Thus says the LORD.

The state allows us to hoard our goods and ignore those in need. **“But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?”** (1 John 3:17). Thus says the LORD. We should use our freedom to be generous and hospitable.

Have I offended you? There is something in God’s Word to offend everyone. If I haven’t found something to offend you with, let me know and I can keep searching. Submitting to God’s truth will always, at some point, mean confronting something we dislike or disagree with. Unless we believe and live perfectly, we must be confronted by something offensive.

In theory we probably admit that our faith and lives are imperfect. But in practice, when it comes to the particulars of our faith and life, we seek to justify ourselves. That’s where we say, **“Yeah, there probably are areas where I am mistaken, and I suppose there are things I do that are sinful, but it’s not this thing.”** If we admit, in theory, that we are sinful and that we can be deceived, we must be open to correction from God’s Word. If we are not open to correction from God’s Word, is there really any truth to our confession that we are by nature sinful and unclean, and that we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed? Probably not.

If we close our hearts to truth, if we close our hearts to, **“Thus says the LORD,”** we are not really free. We close our hearts to truth because we want to be free arbiters of what is true and what is false. This is only an illusion. The reality is that we are in bondage to lies. Believing what God has revealed is the only freedom. Jesus says, **“If you abide in my word, you are truly my**

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disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (8:31-32). The truth—God’s truth—whether we want to believe it or not, is not bondage, but freedom.

Even confessing our sins and confessing our errors is not bondage. It feels like it will be. It feels like if we confess some sin or error, that God or someone else will use it against us to enslave us. That’s what it feels like before confession. It feels like confession is surrendering our power and freedom to God. But we don’t actually have any power or freedom. Our sins are weakness and bondage. So confession is really surrendering our weakness and bondage over to God’s liberating grace. Confession is freedom, because Jesus bled and died for all of these sins. Confession always leads to forgiveness.

To confess means that we say the same thing as God. God says this thing over here is a sin and that thing over there is an error. To confess means we say, “Yes; God is right.” God says we are by nature sinful and unclean. To confess means we say, “Yes God; you are right about me.” Whatever it may be, confessing the truth is freedom. Even if the truth is that you killed your child or abandoned your family or cheated a poor person out of their livelihood, God always answers confession with forgiveness. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Thus says the LORD.

As Christians we are called to truth. We are called to be lovers of the truth. We are called to hear and believe the truth. We are called to speak the truth. And we are called to live by the truth. We are called to be people of the truth. What God says, we accept. Even if the culture doesn’t like it, and even if we don’t like it, living under God’s authority means submitting to the truth. This is good for us. This is the best way to live. It means we depend on the wisdom of God, which is always better than depending on our own wisdom. God calls us to truth. And this is good for us. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.