The prophet’s task

Text: Ezekiel 3-4

Rev. David Waldron

On the occasion of the baptism of Luke van Maanen

**Scriptures:** Hebrews 10:19:31; Ezekiel 3-4

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 371, 385, 71, 295, 169

Series: Ezekiel (sermon #2)

Theme: Having been strengthened by visions of God’s glory, Ezekiel is led by the Spirit and called to fearlessly and faithfully speak God’s Word of warning to His people and to convey the reality of His judgement against the city of Jerusalem by performing a sign-act in which he firstly portrays God’s separation from his rebellious people and then their suffering for a set time under the coming siege.

Proposition: As disciples of Christ, like Ezekiel, we are called to be bound to God’s Word and to perform sign-acts which communicate both His justice and His mercy.

**Introduction**

The year before I came here to Christchurch in 2014, the elders and deacons had written to call me ‘to come and serve amongst us as our minister’. Their letter contained, amongst other things, something of a ‘job description’ for the work. At times I still refer back to that letter to remind myself of what I have been called to do here.

Ezekiel was also a minister of the gospel, in our text from chapters 3 and 4 today we will see his ‘job description’. We will also see how this points forward to Christ Jesus, the Last Prophet (Heb 1:1-2) and how this informs the ‘job description’ for each one of us as followers of Christ, including parents like Jason and Claire who have promised to ‘*do all in their power to instruct their children in the truth of the Christian faith and to lead them by their example to follow Jesus Christ*’.

We saw from the first two chapters of Ezekiel that a ‘refugee crisis’ forms the background to this book in the Bible. Precisely 2,616 years ago, in 597BC, the Babylonians had captured Jerusalem, deporting the King (Jehoiachin), the royal family and the leading citizens and craftsmen (2 Kings 24:14) including Ezekiel, who was a priest and who is the author of this book.

Five years into this enforced exile, Ezekiel saw a vision of the glory of God ruling in absolute authority over all His creation. In this vision, God is revealed as being present everywhere and knowing everything. Even though His people are far away from the promised land, He was still with them in their wounded, weakened, vulnerable and grieving state. God is seen in Ezekiel’s vision as coming in His ‘throne-chariot’, not firstly to wage war on Israel’s enemies (that will come later), but to bring judgement on his rebellious, covenant-breaking people.

Ezekiel is sent by the LORD to minister to the nation of Israel upon whom He has set his love (e.g. Deut 7:7-8), but whose hearts are stubborn. They were a people who had become hardened by their sin (Eze 3:7). That’s what rebellion does to the heart and mind (ref. Heb 3:15). A repeated refusal to submit to God’s authority causes a searing of the conscience and a dangerous resistance to his Word and Spirit.

In response to the rigid resistance of Israel, God empowered Ezekiel with His Spirit (3:12,14, 24) and had His Word become a part of His prophet. To prepare Ezekiel for the work ahead, He made him fit the meaning of his name ‘God makes strong, hardens’. This is what he says to his servant: “*Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces, and your forehead as hard as their foreheads. Like emery harder than flint have I made your forehead. Fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house (Eze 3:8-9)*”. Emery is a very hard greyish-black mineral used as an abrasive and polishing agent. This prophet’s task was certainly not going to be ‘a walk in the park’!

Christ Jesus, similarly, but even more so, had a very difficult ‘job description’. In his gospel John writes: “*He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him”* (John 1:11). Brothers and Sisters in our Lord, as Christ’s disciples, our ‘job description’ is not an easy one. Jesus put it this way "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*” (Matt 16:24).

Jason and Claire, I think that you already know that parenting children in the Lord is not a ‘walk in the park’! At times our own offspring can be resistant to our words and reluctant to follow our guidance.

However, like his servant Ezekiel, the Lord equips us as we’ll see in the two points of our sermon this morning, the first of which is:

1. **Bound to God’s Word**

Surprises can be a wonderful thing – especially on your birthday - but not all surprises are pleasant or welcomed. For example, the arrival of a military force who have come to conquer you and your fellow citizens is neither pleasant nor welcomed. In order to remove the element of surprise in warfare today, satellite imagery has been developed which enables governments to monitor troop deployments and the movement of military vehicles of their potential enemies. Clearly, and obviously, such technology is a recent development.

In the ancient world, the best way to know when a foreign army was coming to attack your city was to keep a close eye on the horizon from a high vantage point. It was for this purpose that watchtowers were constructed on city walls so that watchmen could look out for approaching danger. Part of the task of Israel’s spiritual leaders was to be like watchmen (e.g. Isa 56:10; Jer 6:17; Hos 9:8).

Ezekiel’s ‘job description’ also includes this vital role, as God explains to him: “*Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me*” (v17). To be a watchman was to have a very important part in the defence of others. Like that of an Air Raid Warden in the Second World War when enemy planes would overfly cities and drop bombs. Recruitment posters often had the slogan “*Air raid wardens wanted – a responsible job for responsible men*”. These wardens were the people who set off sirens to warn people to go quickly and seek shelter in underground bunkers. Just as today, civil defence personnel in New Zealand activate a Tsunami warning siren in the event of an expected seismic water wave. If someone was stupid enough to ignore the siren and stay above ground in their home, then it was not the Air Raid Warden’s fault, nor today would it be the Civil Defence person’s responsibility.

So it was with Ezekiel, the watchman: if he failed to give the warning with the aim of saving a person’s life, then he would be responsible for that person’s death. God said, ‘*his blood I will require at your hand*” (v18). However, if he gave the warning and the wicked did not turn from his or her wickedness, then that person would die for their iniquity, but Ezekiel, the watchman would have ‘delivered his soul’ – he would not be held accountable. For the watchman to fulfil his task, he must proclaim his message of warning to everyone who is in potential danger.

So it seems at first very strange then that God tells Ezekiel to put himself under ‘house arrest’ and be confined at home. The Lord says to him “*Go, shut yourself within your house*’ (v25). As if this home detention is not enough, Ezekiel was to be restrained, even within his house, with cords which would bind him (v25). In addition the Lord would disable his speaking capability – like turning on the mute function on your electronic device – so that he would be unable to speak. What was God communicating here to his prophet and to the other exiles in Babylon (identified by God as ‘a rebellious house’). What is His message in this to us today?

**Firstly**, as the Lord’s servant, Ezekiel is completely under his master’s command. He is to remain silent when the Lord does not want to speak to His people.

**Secondly**, he is not able to ‘reprove’ them. Ezekiel is to function as the accuser of Israel on God’s behalf, not as an intercessor or mediator to plead their case. In their rebellion, they had ‘passed the point of no return’, their hearts being so hardened and their rebellion so entrenched. The writer to the Hebrews refers to this desperate condition in these words: **“***For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries*” (Heb 10:26-27).

The Bible is the ‘sweetest’ book ever written. The glad tidings of the gospel are the power of God to bestow eternal life in Christ to all who receive His love with soft, tender and yielding hearts. However, the Bible is also a bitter book. God warns us of the fearful consequences of sin and rebellion that we might yield to His saving love.

We see this two-fold aspect of the Word of God in the ministry of Christ. For example when Jesus went to the home of Zacchaeus the wicked tax collector and brought salvation to this man, who yielded his heart to the Lord (Luke 19:1-10). Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, that is - people you like and me. Jesus also warned of the extreme danger of having a hard heart. He spoke the strongest word of accusation to the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees (Matt 23).

Like Ezekiel, He was bound to speak the words of His Father. Jesus explains it this way: “*The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works*” (John 14:10). Sometimes He spoke, and sometimes He remained silent (Luke 23:9).

As Christ’s disciples, sometimes we are called to speak and sometimes to remain silent. We need the guidance of the Holy Spirit to know what to say and when (ref. Mark 3:11). This is one of the challenges of parenting children, especially as they become older. However, unlike Ezekiel who was very much alone as God’s prophet to Israel, parents like Jason and Claire are part of the church. The promise they made in their third vow regarding the instruction of Luke in the truth of the Christian faith included the phrase ‘*with the help of the Christian community*’.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are all called to be bound to God’s Word, as our only ‘rule of faith and life’. To speak this Word to one another (including Luke as he grows up!) as the sweet message of the gospel but also as God’s gracious word of warning. Also, somewhat like Ezekiel, but not in exactly the same way, we are also called to perform God’s signs.

Which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Performing God’s signs**

Have you ever heard the phrase ‘Jesus Freak’? This was a term which came out in the 1960s to describe someone who displayed unusual or embarrassing enthusiasm for Christ. A ‘Jesus freak’ was a person who might be characterized by:

* A bumper sticker or t-shirt with Scripture references
* A regular church attender
* A willingness and readiness to talk to others about their faith
* A ‘fire in their belly’ about the gospel
* A born-again Christian

A ‘Jesus freak’ is a person of weird behaviour and habits. In a largely godless secular culture, I would suggest that being thought of as a ‘Jesus freak’ is a good thing.

In the 5th year of the Israelites exile in Babylon, Ezekiel would certainly have looked like a ‘God freak’. Visiting his house would have been very weird! There you’d find him tied up with cords and unable to speak. Not a very dignified state, and certainly not what you’d expect from a man called to widely broadcast God’s word!

This was by no means the only strange behaviour which Ezekiel was called to model. As we continue in this book, God repeatedly calls his prophet to perform signs which graphically illustrate the Lord’s message to his people. For example, in chapter 4, he is to ‘act out’ the siege of Jerusalem. In chapter 5, God’s judgement on his rebellious people is portrayed as Ezekiel shaves his head and beard with a sword and divides the cut hair into three portions.

These signs would have seemed weird, bizarre and confronting to Ezekiel’s fellow exiles. We might use the phrase ‘in your face’ and not ‘politically correct’ today to describe these acts which were neither polite nor ‘respectable’. (Ezekiel was not the first prophet perform signs with physical materials e.g. Jeremiah publicly smashed a clay jar to depict the coming destruction of Jerusalem (Jer 19:1-13)).

Let’s now look in a little more detail at the sign Ezekiel performs in chapter 4. Before we do, it’s helpful to know that a siege was a military tactic frequently used in ancient warfare to conquer fortified cities. Mounds and ramps would be heaped up against the walls which then enabled battering rams to be wheeled up in order to break down the doors and gates which protected the entranceways. Siege warfare did not generally gain a quick victory (unless the inhabitants of the city surrendered when they first saw the size of the enemy force amassed against them). Usually a siege would take place over many months as the mounds and ramps were slowly built up and the inhabitants were weakened physically by shortages of food and drink. They would also suffer mentally as they experienced great fear and anxiety about the coming conquest which was almost inevitable unless help arrived in time from outside the city.

In chapter 4, in 593BC, Ezekiel was performing a sign which pointed forward to an event which was yet to come (in 587BC). There are two main parts to the message which God conveys through his prophet as this ‘siege-act’ is performed.

**Firstly, God’s separation from his rebellious people.** You can see this in verses 3 and 7 “*And you, take an iron griddle, and place it as an iron wall between you and the city; and set your face toward it, and let it be in a state of siege, and press the siege against it. This is a sign for the house of Israel.”* (v3)“*And you shall set your face toward the siege of Jerusalem, with your arm bared, and you shall prophesy against the city.”* (v7)

**Secondly, the plight of the besieged Israelites**

* They were confined to the city and could not go out – symbolized by the cords with which Ezekiel was to be bound.
* Food would be in short supply. This, and not some modern-day food fad, is the background to the ‘Ezekiel bread’ ingredients of verse 9, to be eaten as a ‘barley cake’ in a small daily ration of 20 shekels by weight which is approximately 230g of food.
* Water also would be scarce and like food, would be rationed. The daily allotment being a sixth part of a ‘hin’ which is approximately 600ml.
* There would be no firewood for cooking the bread, instead they would use dung. At first the Lord prescribes human ‘poo’ for Ezekiel’s sign-act. Not only would this be highly distasteful for Ezekiel, it would render him ceremonially unclean (Deut 23:13). When the prophet protests respectfully, the Lord allows him to substitute animal dung which was used widely as fuel in the Ancient Near East and is still used in parts of the world today for this purpose. (Ezekiel’s ceremonial cleanliness was not compromised by his service to the Lord).
* Not only would physical necessities be in short supply, there would be no joy or peace, just anxiety and dismay – v16&17

The fate of the besieged Israelites would be to **‘***rot away because of their punishment’* (v17). Notice carefully that Ezekiel is to remain as a man besieged, not because the Lord is against him personally, but because he is to ‘*bear the punishment*’ of the house of Israel (4:4). Clearly the prophet is not able to remove the sin of the people; any more than the Old Testament sacrificial system could (cf. Heb 10:10-11). However, like all those blood sacrifices of old, his enacted sign of being punished for the sins of the people points forward to the cross of Christ.

The crucifixion of Jesus was the greatest sign ever performed in which God visibly communicated both His wrath and His love towards a dying world. God did not merely put on a human costume to act out a drama, He took on flesh in the person of His Son and dwelt amongst people like us. He lived out the message of the gospel. The cross was not an engraved image on a brick, it was a real instrument of torture and shame where Jesus was bound by nails and ‘rotted away’ until he died there. Just as Jerusalem was abandoned by God because of her sins, so Jesus was abandoned by His Heavenly Father because of other people’s sins.

The cross is ‘weird’, bizarre and confronting. The cross is ‘in your face’. It is not polite or pleasant. It was not, and is not, ‘politically correct’ for it embodies God’s fearful wrath against sin. This is why the message of the cross is a stumbling block and foolishness to many (1 Cor 1:23).

Now, there’s something very important in Ezekiel’s enacted siege which you must not miss – the time period during which he was to bear the punishment of Israel: the 390 days in verse 5 for ‘*the punishment of the house of Israel’*; the 40 days in verse 6 for *‘the punishment of the house of Judah’*. From the text it is clear that the days here represent years. It’s likely that Ezekiel only lay down immobile for a part of each day as he still had to prepare his meals (v8-13). Ezekiel is to represent the long history of Israel’s rebellion for 390 years and then to depict the period of the exile symbolically as 40 years. The addition of these two numbers equals 430 – the number of years of the captivity of Israel in Egypt (Ex 12:40).

Here is God’s mercy in the midst of His judgement. The message is that His perfect justice would be satisfied and He would bring freedom to His people again. In the same way, Christ’s cross work was a prolonged period of pain and agony for Him, but did come to an end, resulting in freedom for God’s people.

Can you now see the gospel portrayed in Ezekiel’s weird and confronting sign act of God’s fearful judgement? There is hope, because His judgement against his people will not last forever, it will come to an end. Like Ezekiel, but not in the same way, we too are called by God to perform signs – to enact his judgement and his mercy visibly. We call these sign-acts ‘sacraments’ in the church. They have both been instituted (that is setup or established) by Christ.

One of these ‘sign-acts’ is Lord’s Supper in which the physical body and shed blood of Christ on the cross is represented by bread and wine.

The other ‘sign-act’ is baptism - which teaches us, in the words of the form, that “*we are all under the judgment of God and for that reason cannot be members of his kingdom unless we are born again. Baptism, whether by immersion or sprinkling, teaches that sin has made us so impure that we must undergo a cleansing which only God can accomplish*”. “*Baptism is a sign and seal that our sins are washed away through Jesus Christ*”.

With infant baptism, the message is **not** that the sins of the person being baptised have been washed away through Jesus Christ, but that baptised children, like Luke, belong in the covenant community where the washing of sins away by Christ is taught and demonstrated in the life of the church.

For Luke and others, his baptism does not save him, but this sign points to the need for him to respond in faith to the gospel. We pray that our Lord would enable him to do so through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

Our calling, our ‘job description’, brothers and sisters, as disciples of Christ, is to be bound to God’s Word and to faithfully communicate with our speech both the judgement of God against sin and His compassionate mercy in Christ. We are to perform the sign-acts of Lord’s Supper and Baptism so that others can visibly see both the judgement and the mercy of God represented in the bread, wine and water. We do this, in part, so that others may also may hear the warning call of coming judgement and seek refuge in Christ whilst there is yet time.

The ‘Air Raid’ or ‘Tsunami warning’ siren has sounded. Danger is coming. Judgement is coming. “*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*” (Heb 10:31) Here is the call ‘*seek the Lord and live*’ (Amos 5:6).

Friend, you need to respond and seek shelter in Christ, there is nowhere else to be safe.

AMEN