

Ezekiel 2:8-3:3
Alien Empathy
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I wonder if this thought has ever entered your mind: The world in which we live is becoming more and more unfamiliar to me? Sure, I recognize the physical landscapes, the skies, the trees, the rivers. But the cultural and political landscapes are sometimes almost unrecognizable to me. And I don't have to remind you of the example after example of this all around us. Our social connections are taking on new forms; our political culture is mystifying; and the technology at our finger tips is advancing at a rate few of us can keep up with. I mean driverless cars are virtually already here. Driverless. Cars.

Truly we are living in unprecedented times. And maybe that makes your heart race with excitement—bring it on! Or maybe the Beach Boys Song sums things up for you: “I Just Wasn't Made for Times Like These.”

As much as we like to think that we can understand the world around us; all of us, especially those who watch the evening news would agree, this is a disorienting—even otherworldly time. Maybe that's why we have this ongoing fascination with UFOs and extraterrestrials. And we all know, what's the question we'll get asked when that little green guy sticks his ray gun in our face?

Take me to your leader.

There was a time in the life of God's people Israel in which their lives were so disoriented that they couldn't tell which way was up and which was down. And into their confused lives, God speaks to this confused and disheartened people rich vivid words of hope. The Word came to a young man named Ezekiel, probably not more than 30 years old. The visions God gave to Ezekiel he had an almost otherworldly nature about them. But sometimes that's what we need to hear to have our minds awakened and our hope stirred.

In 593 BCE, 6 years after the Babylonian Empire steamrolled its way through Israel, destroying Jerusalem and the Temple, carrying virtually all of God's people into captivity, God comes to Ezekiel. And God says: “you, Ezekiel, are going to be my sentinel to speak my Word to my people.” And throughout the month of August we are going to be swept up into this book.

Now if you've ever read Ezekiel maybe you're quietly groaning to yourself. Ezekiel really? It's a hard book, it's full of strange and startling images, confusing metaphors, apocalyptic messages. But I think what we will find is that the visions God gives to this young prophet to speak to his people, have striking similarities to our day.

Like Ezekiel, we are aliens. In the book of 1 Peter, Peter will call us *resident aliens*, in that we are constantly living as those who don't completely fit into the society around them. So is Ezekiel, he was living in Jerusalem and was picked up by the scruff of the neck and dragged 500 miles away and plopped down in the capitol city of a foreign empire, surrounded by a people and culture he did not recognize. Not only that, but he was in the midst of a culture that didn't particularly care about the Israelite religion. They weren't asking him, and by and large they're not asking us either.

I remember walking into a Dunkin' Donuts in Montclair New Jersey to buy donuts for my Sunday School Class of teenagers, I was dressed in a shirt and tie. I stuck out like a sore thumb. You see many have forgotten that Sunday mornings are for anything other than coffee, crossword puzzles, a round of golf, or preparing for the afternoon football game.

The people around Ezekiel weren't interested in worship either. His religious world absolutely comes crumbling down when he gets word, 5 years into his gig as a Prophet in Babylon, that Jerusalem has been destroyed. Now they're a people with no buildings, no budget, nothing on which to stand. And yet, in the midst of the rubble of Ezekiel's life, God chooses to speak his word. God's word invites this community of exiles to live unconventionally in an otherworldly context. And that is what we are invited to as well. It doesn't take a great imaginative leap to recognize that we are a lot like the exiled Israelites, foreigners in a strange land.

But God's word comes to Ezekiel and it comes to us and invites us to imagine new possibilities for life together, a sanctified imagination apart from all the things we used to take for granted. You are a community that knows it has a great history, and knows that God has a great vision for his people, so what's it going to look like?

Well this morning's vision, the metaphor we have before us—that Jonathan read so well—is that of a scroll. And in this vision the voice says to Ezekiel don't be like that rebellious house (Israel) who has closed their ears, but open yourself to this word (the scroll) that I am giving you. Then Ezekiel says: "So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. He said, Son of Man, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey."

This is what I believe this text is teaching us this morning, one word: empathy. In the midst of this difficult time for the people around him, Ezekiel could have been drawn into his own story of self-pity and woe-is-me-ness. He had just as many reasons to be bitter and downcast as any of the people around him, but for the scroll. When God's word came to him, in the form of that scroll, it says that as he ate his mouth was filled with the sweet taste of honey.

When he eats, Ezekiel no longer suffers from the short-sighted despair of his situation, he was given a gift filled with the sweetness of God's hope. And that gave him reason and the confidence to empathize with those around him. His eyes weren't fixated on the dust and dirt in front of him, but they had been lifted to see beyond his circumstance and dare to believe that this, even this captivity, even this confusing place, was a part of something much bigger.

Here is a powerful truth for us: while our experience may not be of mourning and woe and despair, like Ezekiel, it may be the story of those to whom we are sent. God is calling Ezekiel to a people who are out of touch with the God who loves them and wants to bless them. But before you go I want you not to know, but to feel the way they feel, and that's empathy.

Em Pathema (In Suffering) when you take within yourself the suffering of someone else. And that's where God begins with this Prophet in training.

God did something similar with another priest in training. In Belgium in the 1860s, a young man named Damien was sent to Hawaii to minister to a number of districts, including the people on the

Island of Molokai. And if you know this story, you know that Molokai was the settlement for people with Hansen's disease—otherwise known as leprosy.

And when Damien was ordained in Hawaii, he asked himself where can I go and what can I do that will most disclose the heart of my savior Jesus Christ, his answer came to him as Molokai.

He joined their leper colony, built their buildings, dressed their wounds, cared for their spirits. There was no physician there only a priest. He built their coffins, dug their graves, and he knew the one thing he must never do is touch them. But he knew he worshipped a savior who touched Lepers, and he couldn't help himself. Until the one day, the most effective day in his ministry, when he could come to morning devotions among those Lepers, and stand before them and say "we lepers."

Because he had joined them, he had stepped into their pain, and their pain was now his pain. And in him they could now see the heart of God as he revealed himself through Father Damien's empathy.

There is hope in the pages of this book, take it in to your life, digest its words, its meaning. And one thing is for certain, it will transform your vantage point, but like Ezekiel it will also sweep you away, out of your own self-focused context, and allow you to see as others see. And as the famous saying goes, break our hearts with what breaks yours Lord. You will not only find hope for your life, but you will find deep cisterns of empathy and compassion for the difficulties of others.

As Paul says in Romans 12: Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn. That was his mandate, and that is our mandate as well as we bear witness to Jesus Christ as resident aliens living uncommon lives in otherworldly times.