
MORTAL DISSONANCE

EZEKIEL 1:1-3, 2:1-3:3, 3:22-27

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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If we think that just because Ezekiel was a priest and prophet of God, he was a superhuman, we are mistaken. He was mortal. Ninety-three times, throughout the entire book of Ezekiel, he's referred to by God as "mortal" and not by his name. He's a human one and God makes sure that he knows it and knows his place in the order of creation. Ezekiel may be called, but he's not the Christ. He's mortal. "O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you... Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me... O mortal, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words... mortal, hear what I say to you... O mortal, eat what is offered to you... Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it... Mortal, go to the house of Israel and speak my very words to them... Mortal, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart and hear with your ears... Mortal, I have made you a sentinel for the house of Israel." Mortal, mortal, mortal. We get the picture God!

Ezekiel is mortal. Human. Finite. God's call to Ezekiel reminds him of his mortality and humanity, just in case he had any thoughts about being more glamorous than that. God is good like that—putting us in our proper place. O, mortal, the calling of God isn't an act to make Ezekiel divinity but to make him more connected to his humanity. The call of God on our lives doesn't make us God, but makes us more fully human. Mortal, mortal, mortal.

It might be too easy to romanticize the divine call or even our human life. But from the very opening lines of Ezekiel, we can sense the dissonance and disequilibrium of the call and life with God and how it's not often clear but confusing, not straightforward but full of tensions and even paradoxical. The call brings dissonance. Crazy and curious calls are par for the human course.

I received a phone call when I was 13. A friend from my youth group called me and when I answered, he said, "Luke, Karen is dead." I'll never forget that crazy call because some calls ring through our lives forever. They resonate in your memory and body. They call you unexpectedly and lead you down paths or to places or people you might have never considered. But that's what a call will do, O mortal. That's life with God. Never quite what you expect. Never quite when you expect but it shapes your journey, your life, your relationships, your way of seeing the world, your very existence. One crazy call that comes unexpectedly to remind you that you are mortal. That's what the call about Karen, who was 12 years old at the time, did to me.

A crazy call, out of the blue. An unexpected call with twists and turns, dissonance and disequilibrium. Straight linear paths will never do for God. The lives of the children baptized today will not be straightforward most likely.

Right from the beginning, we sense this is going to be a rigmarole religious ride for Ezekiel. Ezekiel speaks in first person, "In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God." But immediately following these words, the writer turns to third person: "On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin), the word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the Lord was on him there." First person, then third person. Who's speaking? Whose voice is this? Who's telling the story? From what perspective? We hear two voices, multiple voices, and it can throw a mortal preacher like me off. It can create dissonance for a reader; it's not a smooth start at all in this call narrative. It's a bit crazy actually.

Look at where the call takes place. The people of Israel are in exile by the river Chebar. That's where deportees and the unwanted usually hang out in the Bible—"by the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion" (Psalm 137). It was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin. The fifth year. When in exile, you keep time because you don't forget the time when you're snatched from your home and

comfort and receive crazy calls. Some things in our mortal lives you don't ever forget. You remember, like Ezekiel, the year, the month, the day, the time when you suffered in exile and yearned to go home and be free, the time you received that phone call, that news, that feeling, that abuse. There is liturgical time but I'm talking about our mortal time on earth. Jehoiachin was king of Judah for only 3 months when he was deported by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 598 B.C., and for 37 years was in captivity or "at least house arrest" (J Blenkinsopp) in Babylon.

Mortal, there's a lot of dissonance and tension in life with God. O that it would all be clear and sanitized and peaceful and straightforward and harmonious. But that's not human life with God. That's not mortality. That's not God's call. If exile of a people wasn't enough, where they experienced cultural and religious displacement, then there's even a clue that Ezekiel, though a priest and prophet of God, wasn't immune even from family tensions. He's the "son of Buzi" and "Buzi" means "my contempt." Ezekiel is the son of my contempt. This doesn't appear to be a healthy father-son relationship; maybe we know something about that on this Father's Day. Perhaps there's estrangement or distance or anger. Well, there's a hint of tension here. We don't know anything else about this. It's ambiguous and that's part of the dissonance as well, O mortals. Ezekiel's call is not cut and dry and full of joy all the time, though the word he speaks may be sweet. Yet this sweetness may not be what we expect.

The Lord tells Ezekiel to open his mouth, eat a scroll, and go speak the words of the scroll to the house of Israel. Ezekiel ate it and said, "in my mouth it was as sweet as honey." Seemingly, pretty straightforward at this point. But it's not quite that easy with God because written on the scroll "were words of lamentation and mourning and woe." These three words—were sweet to Ezekiel. He isn't being sadistic but it could be an indication of how he had eaten so many lies before, that to finally swallow the truth was sweet, even if it was lament, mourning, and woe. So much of his calling had to do with lament, mourning and woe for him and his people. Those were words of truth and no one could deny it, finally, which made the taste so sweet. The truth was undeniable and he could stomach it even if God's speech in his mouth was full of lament and mourning and woe.

That's the call sometimes—to lament that life is not right and mourn with those who mourn. To speak the mortal messy truth. It can be sweet as honey but it may not be received that way. Sweet to Ezekiel may be sour to the hearers because others may not want to hear the truth spoken. Mortal, know that God's call on your life will bring dissonance. Everyone will not like you. Everyone will not listen to you. But I'm reminded of the words of Colin Powell who said, "Trying to get everyone to like you is a sign of mediocrity." And God doesn't call us to be mediocre. God calls us to be mortal. That's life with God. Let's be clear, Ezekiel had to swallow laments his whole life, and he might not have liked it nor did others like to hear it. He ate mourning and woe even when his wife died (Ezek 24). Mortals of God here today, you know that there are tough patches that no one ever wants to talk about. Addictions and broken relationships and disease and mental health struggles and histories of abuse. This is just the truth about human lament and mourning and the woes we may endure. This is the mortal life we live before God even as called children of God. Mortal, mortal, mortal. It can be messy. Look at what Ezekiel ended up doing at one point—making food on a pile of dung (Ezek 4)! Sometimes, the call of God leads you to deal with some dung to clean it up and sometimes in life it may even feel like all you're doing is eating a pile of dung!

But you should know that the call of God is not clean or always clear and is often full of tensions and disequilibrium and misunderstanding, grief and glory. Ezekiel is in exile, stuck, in a foreign land. Yet his mortal imagination is free, is unearthly, is apocalyptic, out of this world, even though he's a mortal. His body and his people may be isolated in unfamiliar territory on earth but he has visions that help him see beyond his human life. Through all of the earthly rigmarole, his vision is a heavenly refuge. "Ezek'el saw de wheel, 'way up in the middle o' de air, Ezek'el saw de wheel, 'way in de middle o' de air." He's stuck but he still sees. There's tension here. "The heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God," he says, even while in exile by a river that flowed with the tears of an exile people. He sees fire flashing, four living creatures with wings, wheels and a wheel within a wheel, a dome, and something like a throne and he says, there was "splendor all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord." In his exilic state, this isn't what was expected. He sees the glory of God while they are in grief, mourning, woe, and lamentation. What was Ezekiel smokin'?

His food-eating on a dung plate raises flags, but these visions raise concerns too, even after he's called. You might be called but people can still think you're crazy. All the rumors were out there about Ezekiel's mental state.

Mortal dissonance is a real thing. And, Ezekiel is called to speak and judge his own people while they're in exile. This is hard enough to do to your own kind but then to see the movement of God's presence in the wheels, spirit, and creatures in his vision, yet to find oneself bound, is a frustrating challenge. God moves but Ezekiel's stuck. Ezekiel doesn't experience the movement he envisions. "...mortal, cords shall be placed on you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people..." Ezekiel knows what it means to feel like your life is going nowhere, even when you're called by God.

It's a crazy call and even more so to be a prophet and priest where words are so important and be told to speak to a people over and over again but then to be silenced? God tells Ezekiel, "Mortal, I have made you a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me..... and I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be speechless and unable to reprove them..." You will speak, Ezekiel, but you will also be speechless. This is the paradox of life with God. Never quite clear. Never quite straightforward. Dissonant and off balance are often the route in following God's calling. It may not make sense to us but that's why we are mortals and not God. Mortal, mortal, mortal.

But even at the beginning of the call story, at the initiation of this holy disequilibrium, there are signs of hope and God's presence too, mixed in with the mortal mess. Retired pastor, J. Alfred Smith, once preached that hope was a tiny sprout growing in cracked concrete. So if you aren't looking for hope, you may not see it because it's so small. If you aren't looking for God, you may not recognize where God is at work. However, when we're told of the exile, we're also told that "the word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the Lord was on him there." In the exile, the liminal space of uncertainty, in the dissonance of existential human reality, in the tensions, in the struggle, in the confusion, trying to make sense of what you're seeing and feeling and believing on this rigmarole road of faith, God shows up. The word of the Lord still comes. The holy hand of the Lord is still on Ezekiel. And as the meaning of Ezekiel's name tells us: "God strengthens." God will give you the strength you need in your life regardless of what you face in life. So God still ministers, speaks, guides, and strengthens, all the while amid our mortal callings.

God's presence doesn't delete all of the tension in life. God's presence means that God sticks to God's promises like the promise we see in our baptisms. The promise that, as God claims us, and even the youngest mortals, as God's own, God will never take his hand off of our lives as children of God but will continue to speak and guide for the rest of our rigmarole lives. Yes, we are mortals, but we are God's mortals.

So in the midst of your pain, I hope you can discern the divine Presence, not away from it, aloof, absent, but present, near, even moving by the spirit blowing you and through you in ways you never imagined. In a valley of dry bones, in your silence, in your delusional states, in your bondage, the mobile presence of God is there. The wheels of grace are there. The hand of the Lord is upon you. The word of the Lord will come. It may not be what you imagined but what else do you expect from God, O mortal? God is unimaginable, beyond our full comprehension because God's ways are not our ways. God's thoughts are not our thoughts (Isaiah 55).

Yet God chooses to call us, chooses to speak to and through us, chooses to use us, despite being mortals. Like Ezekiel, we are mere mortals, finite frail human beings, yet God still says, "I will speak with you" and "I am sending you" to speak my words and say, "Thus says the Lord God." The divine word is in the mouth of mortals. The spirit still enters Ezekiel. The spirit still enters you even at your worse moments of disequilibrium. You may find yourselves off balance in some way but God is still working in your life, still speaking words to you and putting his hand on you. This is the way of the Mighty with us mortals. Yes, Ezekiel is mortal, mortal, mortal. But he reminds us of God, God, God. Thanks be to God, who gives us, mortals, the victory through our Lord Christ Jesus (1 Cor 15). Amen.