***“A Prophet Among Them”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, July 4, 2021

**Ezekiel 2:1–5**

1He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. 2And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. 3He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. 4The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord God.” 5Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

**Mark 6:1–6**

1He left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. 2On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! 3Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. 4Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” 5And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. 6And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Happy Fourth of July! I’ll have a thing or two to say about citizenship, in the course of today’s sermon. But first let’s start with Scripture.

Both of our Scriptures tell us something about positive values, although mainly in the breach, that is, in the way the crowd rejects these values. And both passages tell us about certain regrettable features of human nature. To start us off, notice how pessimistic is the Ezekiel passage. He assumes the people will not really listen to him. They are a “nation of rebels who have rebelled against me” (Ezek 2:3). He will deliver his message to them, but all they will learn from it is that a prophet has been among them (2:5). From what he says, we can surmise that *good* citizenship would involve honest loyalty to God, although, unfortunately, he doesn’t see much of it there in Jerusalem. It may be that we are catching him at a pessimistic moment, that in his previous attempts to reach the community, he has already encountered their cynicism and rejection. We do know that he persisted in preaching God’s message, and that some people in Judah must have been receptive, since they preserved Ezekiel’s writings, to the amazing length of 48 chapters, in the collection of the prophets. I am sure that today’s passage accurately reflects Ezekiel’s feelings about his experience as a prophet, but, as I say, the final results indicate that there was some receptivity to his message.

Along with Jeremiah, Ezekiel is one of the great prophets who lived at the time of the ending of the kingdom of Judah, when Judah rebelled against the Babylonian empire, was invaded and crushed, its kingship ended, the Second Temple destroyed, and its upper classes and literate people taken away as captives to the Babylonian capital—the Babylonian Captivity. Ezekiel warned of these possibilities. He had a vision in which he saw the glory of the Lord depart from the temple (10:4; 11:23). He says people were worshiping idols, even worshiping the sun in the temple precincts (8:6–16). Ezekiel warned the Jews they would be punished for their lack of loyalty to the Lord. Then, after the worst happens, Ezekiel prophesies to the exiles that God will rescue them, restore them, and pour out a new spirit upon them. Despite resistance, he persisted in his messaging, and no doubt gained some recognition there in Babylon.

Ezekiel’s experience was similar to Jeremiah’s. Both prophets warned the people of coming disaster, but were not believed. And Jesus also had a similar experience. In Mark we see that during his visit to Nazareth, his home town, some grumblers were saying, in effect, “who is this? We know who he is. He can’t be anything special. We know his mother and his brothers and sisters.” And that’s when Jesus observed that “Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house” (Mark 6:4).

Probably these Nazarenes have heard of the works he had done in Capernaum and other towns, and are jealous. Why hasn’t he done any miracles in Nazareth? Why doesn’t he bring *us* some fame? Of course, Jesus continues to preach his message about God’s loving nature throughout the region, but it must have been difficult for him when his own family and towns folk for the most part did not support him.

Here we see the very people who *ought* to honor and understand the prophet are precisely the ones who feel resentful and hostile toward him. This is a common experience for all innovators, all discoverers, all who break new ground. It seems that no poet is respected by his own family. No innovator is supported by his fellow students. No original thinker is appreciated by the conformists. We see this in the way that the great prophet of the Babylonian Exile, Second Isaiah, was treated. He was “despised and rejected by others. . . he was afflicted” (Isa 53:3, 7).

Such stigmatizing can happen within families. Sometimes families decide what role they want each family member to play, and if someone departs from their assigned role, they are resented. In some families, the most creative person becomes the black sheep. Johannes Brahms’s parents, for instance, encouraged him to learn instruments, but disapproved of his desire to *compose* music. What a loss it would have been if he had decided to conform to their expectations.

Bias against excellence is a very common—and tedious—phenomenon. Einstein, even after he came up with his great physics breakthrough, the Special Theory of Relativity, could not get a teaching job. Imagine that! But excellence, if it is linked with persistence, will eventually gain recognition, and Einstein eventually got a teaching assignment.

There is a surliness in human nature, which often manifests in situations where someone more advanced than the crowd comes along. Have you ever been resented as the “know-it-all” in some subject at school? We’ve seen plenty of this anti-intellectualism in American history. There was even a political party that was called the Know-Nothing Party, an anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant party in the mid 19th century. Starting out as a secret organization, members were supposed to say “I know nothing” if asked about the organization. So there was a sensible reason for the name. Still, isn’t it ironic and appropriate that this bigoted nationalistic party became called the Know Nothings?

I think it’s important that our patriotism today not feed into know-nothing type of bigotry, with hostility to intellectuals, hatred of foreigners, and religious bias. These are the attitudes of “a nation of rebels . . . impudent and stubborn” (Ezek 2:3–4), in Ezekiel’s words. God, take away their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh!

The formation of our country did not happen overnight. The idea to break away from England was a difficult decision, and those who went with that message knew they would meet with violent resistance. It was duly tested over many years of war and instability in the early years after independence. The fight for freedom of speech and religion required courage and wisdom. It was a long test of character, as well, as Madison and Jefferson had to continue articulating the need for these freedoms, eventually overcoming the resistance in Congress.

Regarding human nature, I must say that there is hope that some people will change. Ezekiel promised the Jews that they would be guided back to Judah, where God would cleanse and transform them: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you” (36:26–27).

Jesus also felt sure that a new spirit would change people. He said “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power” (Mark 9:1). This was a prophecy of Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured out. This Spirit is with us today, and enables us to recognize spiritual truth and beauty in others.

So the surliness and suspicion of the grumblers can be reversed and overwhelmed, but they must be willing to cooperate. It takes a willingness to receive the spirit of compassion and goodness, from people who recognize that they need to change, and who allow it to happen. It usually involves a life-changing spiritual experience. Just because we are Christians doesn’t automatically mean that we have the right spirit. We may be in a rut and have more of surliness and mediocrity than we care to admit. We may be stuck in the mud. Many Christians need to be born again, to discover the fresh new life of the Spirit, and the higher motivation that it brings. There are those who have a heart of stone and will need to receive a new heart and a new Spirit. They must be born again (John 3:7). Who knows what experiences God induces in people’s lives to lead them to turn to God for help? There may be several pivotal moments when God comes calling. Even so, there will be some who will not accept the challenge. It is a challenge to break out of the ruts of selfishness and materialism, to have the courage to make a change. But what joy when we *do* accept the challenge that God offers.

Whatever leads people to be born again, it is a glorious day when they stop grumbling against the Son of Man, and experience the refreshing waters of new life—an eternal life. If you’ve had that born-again experience, then you know the discovery that I’m talking about.