

JULY 8, 2012: FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
 Ezekiel 2:2-5 II Corinthians 12:7-10 Mark 6:1-6

Those who expect God to work mighty deeds in mighty ways on their behalf shouldn't listen to today's readings. Our three sacred authors aren't familiar with that kind of God.

If there's one group of people who should be able to rely on God stepping into their lives at key points, delivering them from danger and problems, it's God's prophets. After all, they're Yahweh's mouthpiece, the conscience of their people, the specially chosen individuals through whom Yahweh communicates with Yahweh's people. Throughout Scripture, the normal way to discover God's will is to surface and listen to the community's prophets. They're essential to salvation history. Yet God frequently lets those unique individuals twist in the wind, rarely stepping in to help them even when their lives are in danger.

Ezekiel can't say he wasn't warned about this lack of support. In calling him, Yahweh first warns him of the rebellious personality traits of those to whom he's sent. They're "hard of face and obstinate of heart." Then basically says, "You're not going to win over many of them. Their will to resist you will be stronger than your ability to convert them." Because of covenant responsibilities, God must send prophets to the Chosen People. But God's under no obligation to force anyone to listen to those prophets.

Weakness, not strength, seems to be the name of the prophetic game. Even Jesus, Yahweh's prophet par excellence, discovered this reality. If he had any doubts about the power he possessed, his return to Nazareth immediately removed them. Though he might have been able to "fool" other people in other places, his hometown folk know who he really is: "Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses, and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" In other words, "Who does this guy think he is?"

You might have noticed, this is the only place in the Christian Scriptures which mentions Jesus' occupation. It's certainly not meant to be a compliment, else Matthew wouldn't have later changed it to the "son of the carpenter." Carpenters were not too highly thought of in Jesus' day.

But even more important is Mark's comment that Jesus was "not able to perform any mighty deed there ... He was amazed at their lack of faith." The historical Jesus depended on people's faith. Without it, he was powerless. Matthew really had problems with that, so he switched Mark's "not able to perform" to "he did not perform ..." A huge difference!

It's interesting (and very revealing) to discover that our evangelists had the same problem as the people of Nazareth. As the gospels progress (from Mark, Matthew and Luke to John) Jesus becomes more and more God and less and less human. There's no way John, for instance, would ever say there was something his Jesus couldn't do. Jesus eventually becomes much more than just the village carpenter. Gospel theology always trumps historical reality.

Yet, writing at least ten years before the first gospel, Paul takes us back to that reality by mentioning his "thorn in the flesh." (No one knows exactly what he's talking about, but scholarship money is on malaria.) Whatever it is, it's a constant reminder of his weakness, even in the midst of his prophetic ministry, and it leads him to utter one of Christianity's most important statements: "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

As humans, we naturally want to have power over others. But as our ancestors in the faith discovered, God only works through the powerless. What a revolutionary concept! Too bad so many of us have lost that ancient, essential insight of faith.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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JULY 15, 2012: FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Amos 7:12-15 Ephesians 1:3-14 Mark 6:7-13

Last week's commentary on the powerlessness of God's disciples is again verified in today's Amos pericope.

But before we get into prophetic helplessness, there's something we must understand about a biblical prophet's ministry. Notice how often prophets operate in shrines or temples? Rarely does Yahweh send them to "bad" people. Normally they're commissioned to go to the "good folk:" to people who think they're already doing what God wants them to do, but in reality are far off the mark. Such people hang around shrines and temples, and like all good Jews, they presume prophets will inform them of God's will.

The only problem is that priests and kings have long ago figured out how to beat the prophetic system. They hired their own "prophets" to tell people what they wanted them to hear. Every palace, every shrine had its prophets, people eager (and paid) to deliver the party line. Those are the prophets Amos is referring to when he tells Amaziah, high priest of the Bethel shrine, "I am no prophet, nor do I belong to a company of prophets." In other words, "I'm not your prophet. You have no right to tell me what to say."

Of course, that means in the accepted hierarchical shrine system, Amos has no clout. No authority figure is going to back up his statements. He's totally on his own. Yet he's convinced Yahweh, not Amaziah, called him, and it's Yahweh who gives force to his words, even though most Bethel pilgrims simply regard them as the words of an uncouth, wilderness shepherd.

Remember, the scene in the movie O God! when John Denver asks George Burns (God) for a sign he's actually given him the message God wants him to proclaim. Burns assures him not to worry. "Just show them this," he says, and hands him a calling card with just one word on it: God. "They'll believe you when they see it." Poor Amos didn't even have one of Yahweh's calling cards to show Amaziah.

I presume the Twelve must have also felt powerless when Mark's Jesus sends them out on their own for the first time. This is an important gospel event, demonstrating that Jesus' ministry isn't just a one man show. What he does, he also empowers his followers to do. But notice what they're to do: they're to get rid of "unclean spirits."

As we saw back in chapter one, Jesus' first miracle was exorcizing a demoniac in the Capernaum synagogue. I mentioned then that the first miracle always sets the theme for the entire gospel. Since demons were regarded as causing all evil, not just moral evil, the gospel Jesus is telling his followers that their ministry should constantly revolve around eradicating as much evil in their world as possible. A powerful task for people as powerless as Jesus' followers.

Yet, just as Amos was convinced Yahweh called him, so Christians must always be aware of their God-given calling and dignity. The disciple of Paul responsible for writing Ephesians doesn't want his readers to forget that. He's convinced "God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing — As he chose us in him ... to be holy and without blemish before him... He has made known to us the mystery of his will... that he set forth in him as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth."

As Paul said in last week's II Corinthian passage, our weakness is a sign Jesus is working through us. Perhaps we could better deal with our weakness if, in our daily lives and ministries, we zeroed in on Jesus more than ourselves.

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