**Ezekiel 2:1-5 (ESV)**

**1** And he said to me, “Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you.” **2** And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. **3** And he said to me, “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. **4** The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ **5** And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.

**“How God Measures Success”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Last week you heard about the need to defend religious liberty that is under attack in our country. There was also included in your bulletin an “open letter” crafted and signed by our Synod President along with 24 other religious leaders. A week has passed and I figure some have no idea what I am talking about because they were not here. Others were here but left the insert in the bulletin unread. Still others did read it but feared opening their mouth to anyone else. Finally, a few shared the letter having to suffer discomfort and possibly persecution for speaking of such things to another person. In some ways, we are glad not to be like the prophets of old. God directly put them on the spot. Yet, our hesitation over His Word has to do with how we view success.

The reading from the Old Testament gives us a highlight of Ezekiel. He was a hesitant prophet for a good reason. During his lifetime, the nation of Israel was under attack. When the Babylonians succeeded with a second raid upon Jerusalem in 597b.c. Ezekiel ended up being one of their captives. The picture was bleak for the book of 2nd Kings describes how the invaders “carried off all the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king’s house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of the Lord...” They “carried away all Jerusalem and all the officials and all the mighty men of valor, and all the craftsmen and the smiths. None remained, except the poorest people of the land” (24:12-14). It is to such an overwhelmed Ezekiel God gave a message to speak, but it would also be for his comfort. God calls us to the same success measured by His standard of saving sinners.

First, this is a standard set upon God’s Word. When the likeness of the glory of the Lord appeared to Ezekiel, he fell upon his face. It was out of fear for the man knew how God was judging His people Israel by the hand of the Babylonians. However, this glory revealed came with a better revelation to lift up the weak. Ezekiel stated, “And he said to me ‘Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you.’ And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.” Said, speak, spoke, speaking all emphasize the Spirit of God’s Word at work. Ezekiel heard a righteous decree in those words “Stand on your feet.” It was apart from all the weaknesses of what he saw of himself as an exile in Babylon. God raised Ezekiel up from death to have life before Him.

We too are exiles in a broken and damned world falling upon our faces before God. Of course, this is before the heavenly glory revealed now to us in the face of Jesus. He came by the Spirit conceived in the Virgin Mary and with words from the Father saying, “This is my Son.” His suffering and death was for our sin and judgment. The baptized in Christ know the Law of God does not pull any punches. Luther says,

“The saints and Christians must also suffer this conviction for their commendable life and work and confess that they too have sin…Yet what prevents them from being damned like others is only this: They accept such conviction. They confess and lament that they have sin. They believe in Christ and seek forgiveness of sins through him!”(Convicted By The Spirit 50)

Those who died in holy baptism have a different standard set in water. It is how the Spirit of God has worked to give life by the Word. This forgiveness comes richly and daily for you just as it does for all believer. St. Paul confessed how God works in spite our standards saying, **“**Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Having received the Spirit that raises the unrighteous to be righteous by faith in what God says. This standard secondly marks God’s Word as the means to save. There was no need to sugar coat the situation since Ezekiel stood by the Spirit of God. The prophet heard, “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.” It was not difficult to see the conflict. Israel had turned away from God. His Word was for them, but they did not care. Their success was more important, though in truth, they were not even a united people, but nations of rebels. As bad as the picture of exile, Ezekiel had a bleak picture for proclaiming God’s Word. Not only were their hearts hard, but they were going to be impudent or “hard-faced.” No matter the sorry state of affairs, God set the standard to send His Word as the means to save.

We too face a situation that is bleak and barren. There is nothing wrong with progress, but what happens when that becomes our god? What happens when progress is what we believe is going to solve our problems with sin? In truth, the culture is in chaos, poles run politics to rule by popularity, and churches care more about offending than offering Christ to sinners. Progress is a far different standard than God’s Word sent as the means to save. Whether it is the publicly preached by the called ministers of Christ to the Church or goes out into all the lives of God’s people called by baptism. The Gospel progresses out into a world of hardened sinners. What shocked Jesus in his hometown is how, “He marveled because of their unbelief.” We might marvel over this rejection in a land that once was at home with allowing the Bible to be spoken and practiced so freely. However, Jesus still loves to save and so He sent out His disciples two by two. God’s success does not worship the progress of a world that cannot progress out of sin, death, and the Devil. Instead, it is to save all who hear the call of repentance and faith in Jesus.

Third, and finally, this is a standard set by God is indifferent to failure for His Word prevails. Ezekiel heard the promising hope spoken to him. The Lord said, “And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.” God had a personal point to make His presence known to His people. Ezekiel was not to worry about the audience or the outcome, but simply to be faithful to the Word. The rest was truly outside of his hands. People were not to be captivated by the person, but with the proclaimed Word of God. This is the same as Jesus told His disciples to take nothing with them but His Word. They were not to hesitate over the situation with those unable to hear, but to “dust off their feet” as a sign against them and go on. God is about His work and the promise is that the Word will not fail no matter how it looks in a sinful world.

What a comfort to know God takes responsibility for success in saving still today. People must face this hopeful failure set in the cross. It is by the crucified Savior where human standards see empty success. Jesus appears to offer nothing, since His strength as Savior came in the covering of death at the hands of Roman soldiers. Likewise, the Word and holy Sacraments appear to fail in a world so full of progress at the hands of men. The Devil’s plan is always to embarrass Christ and His bride the Church. Yet, the greatest embarrassment of a cross is the center of a risen promise of true salvation succeeding over sin, death, and the Devil. What was a failure became the faithful victory of God’s Plan for a sinful world. Success has a different standard and no one needs to hesitate in how God speaks to save! More than knowing a prophet has been among us by the Word and Sacrament Jesus takes it upon Himself to be personally present to forgive, restore, and save His people. How do you measure success in your life? How do we want to measure the success of life together as a congregation? God’s Word calls us to a standard of success by His way of faith in the Gospel. His Word is also a call to comfort knowing that success, like the prophets and apostles, depends on God from beginning to end. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting, Amen.