

Barre Congregational Church

July 4, 2021: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ Sixth Sunday after Pentecost ~

“Thus says the Lord”

Our services can be found on our website at www.barrechurch.com and Facebook page.

Scripture Reading: Ezekiel 2 v 1-5 and Mark 6 v 1-13

I. Introduction:

On this 4th of July weekend many families and loved ones will be able to come together for the first time since the pandemic started. Some may be living in a different State, or even in a different country, which has made it difficult to travel and see one another. I personally cannot wait to travel to see my family and loved ones in South Africa. There will be moments of incredible joy this weekend after a period that made one feel as if being in exile, away from the people and places dear to us. The pandemic has been dangerous on a physical level, and it has caused incredible emotional trauma for many. We all know that it has been hard on many families.

The story of the Babylonian exile is of the people of Judah who were taken away into exile from their land, to live away from the place they were used to, the land they took care of, and their lives and livelihoods, their culture, and the things they were used to. They became strangers, immigrants in a foreign land, where life was not easy.

II. The Call and Role of Ezekiel, the Prophet in Exile

The Prophet Ezekiel found himself as an exile in a foreign land, afraid like everyone else, and struggling to make life work. He was a young priest and must have wondered what this all means for him and his career. Our text describes his call by Yahweh, and it starts in Chapter 1 verse 28, where it reads, **“Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking.”** And in Chapter 2 v 1 and 2, **“He said to me, “Son of man,^[a] stand up on your**

feet and I will speak to you. As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me”.

Ezekiel was called and commissioned by God in 593 BC and prophesied until 571 BC. to speak to the people of Israel, those who have rebelled against Yahweh, who revolted against God. They are stubborn, and in the Hebrew language, it means to be hard of face, doing things they are not supposed to do; they are obstinate, which in Hebrew means hard of heart and mind, meaning an interior hardness, a heart of stone, which needs to be replaced by a heart of flesh. They were a rebellious household, in defiance against Yahweh. This is Ezekiel's target audience, and he needs to speak to them, "Thus says the Lord". In verse 7 and forward, he must eat the scroll where the word of God was written, words of lament and mourning and woe. The people of Israel will suffer, because that seems to be the only way Yahweh could get their attention. They need to turn away from their wicked ways, and Yahweh will have compassion on them, but if they do not turn away from their wicked ways, they will die for their sin. Ezekiel becomes a prophet of Judgment in exile, while he himself is in exile. Ezekiel is also, however, a prophet of renewal, as he gives the promise of God that they will be brought together before God from their scattered existence, and God will have compassion over them, bring them back to the land of Israel, and rebuild them. They will receive a new heart of flesh. We see forty years later the fall of Babylon happen.

The consistency of Yahweh's message

It has always been Yahweh's interest to let the people of Israel know that they are loved and cared for. We see this in the story of Ezekiel, and in the message of Jesus in Mark, that it was and has been God's interest to be in relationship and covenant with humanity.

It has always been humanity's fallen nature to be separated from God, and for God to provide messengers throughout history to call us back into the presence of God again. In the case of Israel, there was active rejection, and rebellion against God, as is described in the book of Ezekiel.

It is easy to go through life in a self-sufficient manner, living with an enlightened mind, exploring life and all that it offers for comfort, personal aspirations, successes, and

pleasures. Part of the failures of humanity however, is the lack in consistency of a deep relationship with God, and therefore preventing the Kingdom of God to take hold in the earthly environment, and allowing destructive forces to infiltrate all spheres of life.

III. Conclusion

The pandemic has been like an exile for many of us who have not been able to see our families and loved ones. For many there is now the opportunity to see your loved ones again, and to feel the loving and caring presence of those you have missed. It will be different, but it is still a gift to be reunited with loved ones. Then there are many who do not have that opportunity, because of the losses they have suffered.

As a church, we have been dispersed to a certain extent as well, because of the pandemic. But in our dispersion, we have tried to be creative to bring God's word to you as a congregation. The work of the church continued in the best way we were able to do it. We are now back in church in the best we can...managing the safety protocols to the best of our abilities; and we are not alone. God is with us, and God gathers us as the Shepherd does the sheep.

We have an opportunity after much uncertainty and deep concern, to renew and restore our life in our church, and our covenant with God, who brought us through, and who wants to bless us with all things new. Our church is the place where God reigns, where the Name of God is called upon, in worship and in prayer. It is the place where the prophetic message still lives in the hearts and minds of people, addressing that which is against God's will, that which hurts people, a place to call for the wrongs to be corrected, and to move the hardened heart closer to God. It is a place of service to others, to the community, and it is a place where we care for the sick, the young, the elderly, the weary and the vulnerable.

The prophetic and Christ-message is an encouragement to us to bring life and vibrancy to the church through our individual calling to be in community with others and encourage those on the margins to participate in this spiritual journey with Yahweh and Christ, and where we all hear the voice of God, "Thus says the Lord." Amen.