

## Unexpected!

**Lord, may the meditations of my heart and the words of my lips be acceptable in your sight. AMEN**

In the movie Pollyanna, our first introduction to her church preacher is when he starts his sermon by proclaiming, “Death comes unexpectedly!” In a later sermon he begins with Psalm 118, verse 24: “This is the day that the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad in it.” If you have seen the movie, you know that a young girl named Pollyanna, new to the parish, shared her belief with the preacher that all people had good within them. After his reflection of their unexpected conversation, the preacher opened himself to a new understanding about his congregation and his call to share with them the goodness of the Lord.

Our scripture readings today feature Ezekiel and Jesus both of whom are called by God to be prophetic in difficult situations. Each of these scripture passages challenges us to be open to both an unexpected messenger and message!

In our first reading today, we hear that the Lord commissions Ezekiel, a former priest in Jerusalem and now in Babylonian exile, to be a prophet. Earlier, God had validated his presence with Ezekiel in an elaborate vision. God discloses that not everyone would listen to Ezekiel’s prophecy, but they would know that there was a prophet among them.

In other words, God was answering the question on the people’s minds: How can the Lord whose temple stands in Jerusalem come to a people in Babylonian exile? For the people of Judah, the spiritual world was one that had been given visual shape and meaning through the symbols and feature of the Jerusalem temple. Ezekiel would reveal his unexpected vision of the living God who would be present and active through the prophetic word.

The early focus of Ezekiel's message would concern the terrible consequences that would follow upon any attempt of rebellion against Babylon by those who were still in Jerusalem. However, there was rebellion, and both the temple and cities were destroyed. Later in his preaching, Ezekiel proclaimed, to the people that were impatient to return to their homeland, that only the *contrite* waiting of God's people could open the way to a future return and rebuilding. Just as the Lord had shared with Ezekiel, his words might be dismissed by the people, but they were true to future events.

In today's gospel from Mark, Jesus has returned to his hometown. Nazareth was a small village. Here he should have expected a warm welcome and enthusiastic acclaim. Yet, Jesus meets with a very different response.

We are told that the villagers were astonished at his wisdom and authority. But in this case, it is a wisdom and authority that seems inappropriate and out of place to them. In their minds, Jesus is just someone in Nazareth which they have always known. Their preconceived notion was that Jesus should be a carpenter. They saw nothing extraordinary about him. Nothing that would disclose him as an unexpected prophetic messenger and definitely, nothing that would point toward the idea that Jesus could be inaugurating the kingdom of God. They were like those which Jesus spoke about in Mark 4:12 "*who could look and see but do not perceive - - hear and listen but do not understand*".

So, can we judge Jesus' relatives and the townspeople of Nazareth? One commentary resoundingly says NO! It suggests that this incident reveals Jesus was "extraordinarily ordinary". In other words, Jesus lived a life so simple and humble that the possibility that the spirit of God was existing in him was simply incomprehensible.

Our gospel ends with an unexpected surprise! Even though he faced little success in proclaiming his prophetic message in Nazareth, Jesus sends out his disciples to mission. Scholars suggest that the mission of the disciples will highlight the fact that while the natural family of Jesus seems unable to understand his wisdom and works, the disciples will engage in teaching and activity which is modeled closely on that of Jesus and so initiate his new family.

The disciples did not go out alone but in groups of two. A lone disciple would be at risk of discouragement, danger, and temptation. Two disciples could pray together, encourage and support each other, evaluate their mission activities, and discern how to deal with problems together. Scripture scholars also suggest that sending out in groups of two could have been a reflection of the concrete missionary practice of the early church.

The staff that the disciples would carry was symbolic of authority. That symbol goes back in scripture to the staff carried by Moses. Having sandals on their feet would encompass the idea of always being ready to move to another location. Of course, sandals could also be used for the dramatic effect of wiping the dust from their feet if their message was not heard. Again, scholars note that these two items connect the missionary journey with the Israelites preparing to eat the Passover meal prior to their departure from Egypt, with “their sandals on their feet, and their staff in their hand.” (Exod. 12:11)

Perhaps the items the disciples were not to take – food, sack, money, or a second tunic – were to emphasize that they were not self-sufficient but God dependent. It also assures that the disciples will be dependent upon the hospitality of the people to whom they go.

In his book, *Say to This Mountain*, Ched Myers insightfully states, “Rendered a “stranger at home”, Jesus is instructing his community to learn to be “at home among strangers.”

Like the exiles in Babylon, far from the Jerusalem temple, who unexpectedly experienced the Lord through Ezekiel’s prophecies; God’s presence in the world today doesn’t begin and end at our church doors. With our hands, voices, and hearts, each person in our Resurrection Community is called to proclaim the risen Lord to the world!

The disciples were instructed by Jesus to carry a staff and wear sandals. For us the most important gift we wear and carry to others is our spiritual relationship with the Lord. As we continue to grow in that relationship, there are two questions we *might* ask ourselves in order to be more effective proclaimers of Jesus’ message.

*Are we open to God’s voice, appearances, and actions in unexpected places?*

*Are we open to where the Lord asks us to journey?*

Lord, may we always follow your footsteps to proclaim your message!

**I pray in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**