

“Jackals Among Ruins”
Ezekiel 13:1-14
January 25, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

Have you ever noticed how almost all the good stories that have been around for a while have memorable bad guys? The *Star Wars* movies would just not have worked without Darth Vader, who seemed the epitome of evil. The Joker in *Batman* and Biff in *Back to the Future* all serve the role of the villain in such a way that we root against them. Who serves the role of villain in the story of the Bible? We would obviously have to put Satan in that central role, but I think the false prophets would have to be listed as well. They appear from the beginning of the Bible to the end, claiming to speak for God when they have actually received no word from God.

Our passage this morning is one of the longest in the Bible about false prophets. Ezekiel, the true prophet, speaks a prophetic word against the false prophets. Though they have claimed to hear God and bring his word to the people, they now hear it for the first time and find that it is a word against them. God is against them because of the central purpose he has designed for his word. God has always chosen to draw near to his people through his word. He comes with a word of life and promise. It doesn't take Satan long to realize the importance of God's word. So when he comes to the Garden to tempt Adam and Eve, he challenges the word of God. "Did God really say?" are the very first words he speaks. Satan's desire is to corrupt the channel through which God has chosen to enter into a relationship with humanity. If he can cast doubt on the truthfulness of God's word or introduce ideas that are contrary to God's words, he will succeed in preventing a relationship between God and humanity.

False prophets are one of the chief weapons Satan uses to attack the word of God. Their affect is doubly damaging. First, they corrupt God's word by introducing promises and ideas that are not from God. Second, they hurt those who are true prophets by eroding their credibility. Their effect is not unlike people who impersonate police officers. That is regarded as a criminal act in our society, because it is rightly seen not only as fraudulent, but as something that hurts all true policemen. Satan knows the harm false prophets do, so this is one of his common attacks upon the true faith. Notice three truths we learn about false prophets from Ezekiel 13.

I. The Causes of False Prophecy

Why does a person become a false prophet? I don't think it appears as one of the options on a career aptitude test, and I've never met a young person who says he wants to be a false prophet when he grows up. So how does it happen? Verses

4-5 give us two images that explain how it happens. First, God says that false prophets are **“like jackals among ruins.”** I’ll have to confess that I wasn’t sure exactly what a jackal is, and I had to look it up. I found out that it is an Asian form of a coyote. Coyotes will sometimes hunt small mammals and they will sometimes scavenge for their food. It is their tendency to scavenge that is in view in this verse, because they are located among ruins. Picture a ruined city the day after the attacking army leaves. The jackals come in to pick over everything that may be edible, including some of the bodies of the deceased that were not given proper burial. Jackals do not come in with a trowel in paw ready to start the rebuilding process. They are opportunistic, and it is primarily the suffering of others that provides them their opportunity. And they use their opportunity for their own purposes rather than providing help for others.

The second image is found in verse 5, where we read that the false prophets **“have not gone up into the breaches.”** The image here is that of a city wall protecting its citizens against an attacking army. In ancient warfare, an attacking army would lay siege to a city, which means they would surround it and attempt to weaken the city’s defenses by waiting for its water and food supply to play out. Then, when a sufficient period of time had passed, they would build a siege ramp against the outside of the wall in order to begin tearing down the wall at a high point where it would be weaker. The defending army would build a counter-ramp at that point and send up warrior/builders to fight and rebuild at the same time. Only the bravest would be found at these breach points. To picture a prophet figuratively as carrying a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other would give us a good picture of the work of a true prophet. But false prophets would never choose to be in such a place. It’s far too dangerous for their preferences.

In both of these images, there is an example of self-centered behavior. The jackal acts in its own self-interest, and the one refusing to stand in the gap of the wall does so for selfish reasons. People distort the word of God and become false prophets because of selfishness. So when they prophesy, they are only following their own spirits (v. 3). Note the extraordinary situation described in verse 6. They expect God to fulfill their word. Their starting point is all wrong. Instead of starting with God, they start with themselves and make God merely a tool to help them get what they want. But their own desires, not God’s word, are ultimate.

Still another example of this connection between a self-centered outlook and false prophecy is the misleading of God’s people by giving a prophetic word of peace, when there is no peace. **“They have misled my people, saying, ‘Peace,’ when there is no peace”** (v. 10). Remember that Ezekiel wrote during that eleven year period of time between the first conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 597 B.C. and the final destruction of the city in 586. These prophets were probably declaring that there would be peace again in Jerusalem as God gave them the victory over all their enemies. One can imagine them waxing eloquent with their message, not unlike the false prophet did in the days of King Ahaz and King Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 18). They were considering whether they should go into battle against the Syrians, and a prophet named Zedekiah gave an

entertaining illustration. He made horns of iron, put them on his head and prophesied that in just this way the armies of Israel and Judah would push the Syrians until they are destroyed. But it didn't happen that way, because he was a false prophet. Something that lies at the heart of false prophecy is telling people what they want to hear instead of what God has said. Why do preachers and prophets bring a word of peace when there is no peace? Why do preachers in our own day assure their listeners that the only hell that exists is the one in this world, and they need not fear any future judgment in hell? Because they care more for the approval of their listeners than for the truth of God. They are self-centered.

II. The Outcome of False Prophecy

When prophets and preachers start telling people what they want to hear instead of what God has said, the results are not good. Verse 9 tells us one of the results: **“They shall not be in the council of my people.”** The council is the place of influence, where important decisions are made. When prophets or preachers abandon the whole truth of God, they lose influence. Such a loss of influence is understandable. Imagine a doctor who traded truth for approval. Someone comes to his office with test results that show a cancerous tumor. Knowing that the patient doesn't want to hear such bad news, the doctor assures him that everything is fine. Two years later, the patient is dead from an illness that could have been treated. It's not hard to see that such a doctor would quickly lose all influence. No one would go to a doctor who did such things, and we would all see this behavior as gross malpractice that should lead to a loss of a medical license, if not to prison.

It seems clear to me that the pulpit has lost a great deal of its influence today. It has been put on the margins of our national life, and preachers as a class are not held in high esteem. Whose fault is this? The national media is made the whipping boy for so many things, but I don't place the blame there. I think the problem lies within the pulpit itself. So much of what is called preaching today amounts to asking people to look inside and be true to themselves. Even within the evangelical church, a sermon's entertainment value has risen above its truth value. A successful sermon has become one that makes people laugh, holds their interest and makes them feel good about themselves. Until that changes, the influence of preaching on our national life will continue to decline.

Another result of false prophecy is found in this image of a whitewashed wall. Remember that in the culture of Ezekiel's day a wall was the central part of a city's defense. A weak wall meant a weak city. The people build a weak wall. The prophets, instead of speaking truth and calling upon them to strengthen the wall, cover it with plaster and pronounce it strong. The assertion of the power of positive thinking is nothing new. These prophets thought that if you repeated something enough times, it would make it so. If they declared loudly and frequently enough the strength of Israel and its certain conquest of its enemies,

then it would happen. But it is a plastering of a weak wall. Giving it an appearance of strength doesn't make it strong if at its heart it is weak. The implication is clear. False prophets cause the weakening of an entire nation by their departure from God's truth. They erode the strength of the people at a foundational level.

There is another even more tragic result of false prophecy. It gives false assurance that will not be able to withstand the outbreak of God's wrath. The weakness of the wall will be exposed on the day of God's wrath, and the plaster will do no good on that day. One of the reasons it is hard to expose false prophets is that the accountability window is so large. What I mean by that is that the exposure of their falsehood takes a very long time. The preachers who assure people that there is no hell will not be exposed for a very long time, and then it will be too late. It's like being a roofer in Lima, Peru. That city lies within the most arid desert in the world. It never rains there. In a place where it never rains, almost any roof will do, so that a bad roofer will not be exposed for a long time. During this time prior to Judgment Day, almost any preaching will do. But when God's judgment is fully revealed, only that which is true will stand.

III. The Antidote to False Prophecy

One of the difficulties in addressing the problem of false prophecy is that there is no one alive who will put him or herself in this category. I have come across several people in my lifetime who I think probably are false prophets. Not a single one has ever said, "I am a false prophet." So the first need is in recognizing this within oneself. So how do we recognize it? I think we have to go back to the underlying causes we've already discussed. Do you have a problem with self-centeredness or with craving the approval of others? Then you have within yourself the perfect soil and climate for the growing of the weed of false prophecy. So the first thing we must do is to see this as a problem that's not out there somewhere, but within each of us.

If recognizing this tendency within ourselves is the first step, what do we do with it once we see it? We have to go to the true prophet. Moses said in Deuteronomy 18 that God was going to send another prophet, **"and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him"** (Deut. 18:18). That prophet is Jesus. What does Jesus tell us about God's word? He said in the Sermon on the Mount, **"Until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished"** (Matt. 5:18). Jesus believed in what we call the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible. "Verbal" means that the words themselves are inspired, not just the ideas. Plenary means full, which refers to the fact that the entire Bible is inspired. Jeremiah 3:16 is just as inspired as John 3:16. The practical application of this is that we must receive the entire word of God. Unless we accept all of God's word, we can't have any of it. It's like marriage. You can't say to a prospective spouse, "I only want you when you're young and healthy." Such an offer is an insult and a

violation of the nature of marriage. You take it all, for better or for worse, or you should get none of it.

Our natural tendency is to read God's word only to reinforce what we already believe, while somehow explaining away what we don't like. Do you realize that to do so is to shift the authority entirely from God back to yourself. Imagine having a child who weighs all the commands from his parents, and who only agrees to do what he already wants to do. So if his mother calls him to the dinner table and he is already hungry and ready to eat, he complies gladly. But if she makes him eat the broccoli on his plate when he doesn't want to, he weighs that command and opts out of it. In such a situation, the authority rests with the child, not the parent. In the same way, if we don't receive all of God's word, we have overthrown its authority and have replaced it with our own. Our need is to pay especially close attention to those parts of God's word with which we disagree.

If we don't let Jesus be our true prophet, we will never experience the love of God. God's love will just be to us some sentimental feeling. It will never be enough to make us surrender our whole lives to God. This is due to the fact that we don't want to hear from God the radical message of grace he brings to us. By nature, we all want to get our house in order and then let God accept us. But that is like the work of these false prophets in spreading plaster over a decrepit wall. Our true prophet comes to us with two messages we need to hear. First, he says that our house is in far worse condition than we know. That wall that we think just needs a coat of paint, Jesus says that it is riddled with termites and about to fall down. So he enters the house of our lives with a sledge hammer instead of a paint brush. He comes in to tell us that we don't love him and we don't love others, the two greatest commandments in the Bible. To receive that from him feels like receiving a blow from his sledge hammer as it knocks down a large section of a wall within our house. As we receive this message from our true prophet, we are ready for a second one. His plan for our lives is far more grand than we have realized. He wants to set us free by his love. He says to us, "Your house is too far gone for you to restore it as it should be, but that task is not too big for me. I will forgive you, heal you and free you to live for me. You don't need to live under the tyranny of trying to earn my favor because I will give it freely to you."

CONCLUSION:

God chooses to draw near to us through his word and through his sacraments. I want to encourage you to let Jesus come near to you through both of those means today. As we receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, ask him to show you where you are not receiving Jesus as your true prophet. Satan attacks the word of God because he knows that it is central. So let it be central to you as you meet all the challenges of life with the most powerful thing in the universe, the word of God's promise. Ask him to help you hear his word of grace and freedom to you.