

we roll past, to post online and say, “So scary! Thoughts and prayers!”¹ But Adamopoulos stopped the bus, looked at Campbell, and they both jumped out and ran toward the building. They knew it was the middle of the night and people were likely sleeping. They started banging on doors, yelling that there was a fire, and doing anything they could to wake people up and get them out. “We didn't think about getting hurt. Just getting people out,” the bus driver said. The two of them saved all fourteen people in the building, including several children and a resident with dementia. When everyone was safely out, Adamopoulos let all the residents take shelter on his bus while firefighters arrived to put out the flames. After about an hour, emergency crews and family arrived to take people to safety. When the early morning rescue effort was over, Adamopoulos resumed his bus route through Chicago. Just like running into the burning building, he didn't think too hard about it. He simply did what he thought was right. The grace of God was already a part of him, flowing right through him, and shaping his actions even in the most dire circumstances.

Faced with challenges big and small, there are lots of ways to react: ignore, rebel, go the other way. When we hear the call of God, which is often challenging, we can do those same things. Or, we can open ourselves to receive the message, to interact with the challenge. When God's grace becomes a part of us, deep in our bones and bellies, then perhaps we will be open to receiving and interacting with the message more often than not. Ezekiel ate the scroll of God and it was sweet. In a few minutes we will come to the Lord's Table. This is a place where we eat and drink things that also taste sweet. At the table, we enact this mysterious and holy idea of the symbols of Christ becoming a part of our very bodies, deep in our bones and our bellies. We come to this table to receive this blessing, as a way of letting God's grace flow into us over and over again. So that, with that grace at work within us, our natural response to God can turn from pushing back to one of openness, curiosity, compassion, and love.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

July 7, 2024
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
“The Sweetness of the Word”
Ezekiel 2:1-3:3
Rev. Emma Nickel

What do you think of when you hear the word *rebellion*? Lots of events in the history of our country have been called rebellions, including the American Revolution itself - colonists rebelling against the English crown. Today, I also encounter the word ‘rebel’ being used in lighthearted, positive ways. My kids have a few titles in the book series called *Rebel Girls*, which are all about building confidence and courage. But the tone is not so lighthearted when our passage today talks about God's people in rebellion.

God had called Ezekiel to speak to the people on God's behalf. God took this call seriously and wanted Ezekiel to do so, as well. The prophet came from a priestly family and was trained in the rites and rituals of the faith, so he was prepared for the calling. But his particular job description sounds pretty impossible. Because the people Ezekiel was supposed to speak to were a nation of rebels. “They are a rebellious house,” God said. They were not listening, not living in God's ways, not following in God's path.

If we perceive ourselves as faithful, then it's easy to condemn other people for rebelling against God. But maybe we should go easier on the people in this story. Kyle Brooks writes, “rebellion is a natural *reaction* to difficult messages.”¹ It's hard to hear something that seeks to correct our behavior or point out where we might have gone wrong. It's difficult to listen when the message challenges who we believe ourselves to be. And if things are rough already, we may not be very open to any message at all.

Now there is a lot of good news from the Biblical prophets, from Jesus, and from God: the assurance of God's love and presence; the gift of grace and salvation which God gives freely; our place in the community of faith. But a lot of prophetic messages are harder to hear. A lot of the messages we may bump against and want to rebel. Jesus said to love our enemies. Are we doing that? Are we thinking about the people we most disagree with in this election year and are we seeking not to tolerate them, but to love them? What does that even look like when the stakes are so high? Jesus said to pray for those who persecute us. Many of us here may not have experienced persecution in its truest sense. But even people who give us a hard time or who seem to work against the causes we care the most about - are we praying *for* them as people; and not just praying for them to become

¹ Kyle E. Brooks, “Summer series 2: Everyday Prophecy,” *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series, Vol 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019), 128.

² Brooks, 128.

³ Josh Haltom, “There is good in this world,” Sunny Skyz, June 1, 2023, <https://www.sunnyskyz.com/feel-good-story/4064/There-is-good-in-this-world>

⁴ Scott Simon, “Opinion: Some heroes drive city buses,” March 9, 2024, NPR, <https://www.npr.org/2024/03/09/1236986099/opinion-some-heroes-drive-city-buses>

more like us. Do we turn the other cheek when someone hurts us? If someone steals a shirt from us, do we run back and offer our coat as well? In our heart of hearts, do we believe what Jesus said that the poor are blessed and that peacemakers are the ones who will inherit the kingdom of God? Even that most well-known and deceptively simple message to love our neighbors just the way we love ourselves is hard not to push back on, at least occasionally.

What we feel in our hearts about these challenging messages of faith we probably wouldn't normally label *rebellion*. But we certainly feel discomfort and maybe even outrage about some of them. So our reaction is often to ignore God's message. Other times, we push back, or give ourselves some kind of out, or decide that *actually* doing that thing cannot be what God really meant. Maybe all of that is a kind of rebellion: "we resist the things we've been told and try to find our own way."¹

God knew, in Ezekiel's time and in ours, that people often respond this way. So God told Ezekiel from the start that it wasn't going to be easy to share God's message. Surely this was a hard message for Ezekiel to hear. "Welcome to your new job. It's going to be like pulling teeth from day 1." He could have rebelled, pushed back, said 'no thank you' to this calling. He could have headed in the other direction like the famous prophet Jonah did. But Ezekiel tried to listen. The Spirit entered into him and set him on his feet. Ezekiel said, "I heard God speaking to me." And that's the first step, anyway: listening when God speaks. Being willing to hear the message in the first place. Withholding our judgment of it long enough to actually process it.

Then something pretty wacky happened. God said to Ezekiel, "open your mouth and eat what I give you." In front of Ezekiel, a hand was stretched out toward him, holding a scroll presumably with the words of God written on it. God said, "Eat what is offered to you. Eat this scroll." If you're thinking, "what is going on here?!" then you're not alone. This image is a strange one, whether we believe Ezekiel really chewed up the scroll and swallowed it or whether we think this story is symbolic. But either way, it tells us something. The messages God needed the people to hear were precious. God wanted Ezekiel to hold them so close to his heart, that they would actually enter into his body and become a part of him. Despite this bizarre request to eat the scroll, Ezekiel didn't rebel against it. He said ok and ate God's message on the scroll. "And in my mouth," he reported, "it was sweet as honey."

Written on the scroll were more challenging words. But they were the words of God and words that God was offering to shape the lives of the people in faith. So Ezekiel knew that they were good. And instead of pushing back or running away from them, he accepted them. He let that message shape him, become a part of him, so that he could offer it to others.

Rebelling against the challenging ways of God is one way to respond, maybe a natural way. But it is not the only response available to us. Strange though God's message sometimes may be, we can also open ourselves and let them become a part of us. Let them sink into our hearts and dwell there, even when we are not yet sure what to make of them. If we allow those messages to become inseparable from who we are, then we cannot help but live into them. God's messages - the beautiful ones and the hard ones - will shape how we live and how we speak; what we do and the thoughts we think. Letting that message become a part of us may allow us to act in the ways of God more naturally. Following more closely in the path of Jesus may become our baseline, rather than something we only wish to be able to do.

I saw two stories recently where people seemed to act in a faithful way without even thinking. Where the grace of God had entered people's hearts and lives, flesh and blood and was flowing through them to bless others. I doubt these people ate any scrolls. But their response to challenges was to embody compassion and love. There was no rebellion in sight.

First, an airline passenger named Josh shared the story of a couple who acted this way on a recent Southwest Airlines flight. There was an unaccompanied minor traveling to Baltimore to visit her mother. Southwest Airlines has open seating, so anybody could have ended up next to this little girl. The passenger wrote, "...in fact many people avoided her and her boundless energy during boarding. But finally, a couple occupied the two seats to the girl's right." As Josh tells it, "Within minutes the young girl began chatting and the couple likely realized this wouldn't be a relaxing flight...and they just rolled with it. As drinks were being served the couple didn't even get a chance to voice their requests because they were cut off by the young girl stating, 'I'll take water with a straw and so will they so we can paint!'...[Then] the young girl brought out her Hello Kitty paint sheets and the couple spent the next hour following her instructions. [Soon] the man next to her [was] being covered with Marvel stickers. They [were] on his ears, in his beard, arms, everywhere. And he [was] just rolling with it." For Josh, the message he took away from this sight was, "There isn't a script or instruction manual for love. You just have to roll with it."¹ In some way, that couple had let God's grace come inside them to become a part of them. Their compassion and openness to their neighbor flowed through them, becoming a part of their way of being.

The second story happened in Chicago back in March. Anastasios Adamopoulos was driving his Route 71 bus for the Chicago Transit Authority just after 2am on a Monday morning. He had only one passenger, Chris Campbell. As they drove through town, they saw flames erupt into the sky. It looked like the sky was catching fire and the blaze was intense and frightening. A reporter later said, "Some of us might see flames while riding on a bus in the middle of the night and call 911 to report, "Hey, there's a fire!" and feel we've been diligent citizens. We might record video of the flames as