

Title: Ow, Wow, Woe, and Whoa!

Text: Ezekiel 13: 1-9; Matthew 23:13-22

If you have ever wondering how serious God is about your redemption – reaching you and guiding you in the way of Jesus Christ – these are passages for you. And if you have ever wondered how serious God is about the redemption of others – and what that might mean of you – these are also the passages for you. They are full of grace – with all of its freedom. And cost. Will you pray with me?

Ezekiel 13: 1-9

13 The word of the Lord came to me: ²“Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: ‘Hear the word of the Lord! ³This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the foolish^[a] prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing! ⁴Your prophets, Israel, are like jackals among ruins. ⁵You have not gone up to the breaches in the wall to repair it for the people of Israel so that it will stand firm in the battle on the day of the Lord. ⁶Their visions are false and their divinations a lie. Even though the Lord has not sent them, they say, “The Lord declares,” and expect him to fulfill their words. ⁷Have you not seen false visions and uttered lying divinations when you say, “The Lord declares,” though I have not spoken?

⁸“Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because of your false words and lying visions, I am against you, declares the Sovereign Lord. ⁹My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. They will not belong to the council of my people or be listed in the records of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.

Matthew 23: 13-22

Seven Woes on the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees

¹³ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. ^[14]^[a]

¹⁵ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

¹⁶ “Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.’ ¹⁷ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? ¹⁸ You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.’ ¹⁹ You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹ And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. ²² And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by the one who sits on it.

Whoa. As is whoa – that is amazing. And also whoa – as slow down. Let’s consider this. And woe – as in difficult and challenging circumstances. Significant consequences – for leaders how mis-use the trust handed to them.

Was thinking – maybe I could say – Whoa! – Penn State really came back after last week’s disappointment. Or Whoa! The Phillies are off to a great start. Instead – Whoa, whoa, whoa – don’t get too anxious. Because this could be a season of woe.

Whoa! Whoa (slow down). Woe.

A couple of weeks ago, got to preach – grateful for the grace and trust of Pastor Bob and the session of this congregation to share God’s word for you. In that sermon, I encouraged you to get out of bed in the morning and say ... what? WOW! One member told me – Michael, I do that – only I do the first 2 letters and then the second two letters. Do that with me:

WO

OW

Now quite what we’ve got here! But maybe you do get out of bed in the morning and go “Woe.” In all of its many forms.

Here Jesus turns his eyes, his passion, and even his anger – on leaders who are mis-shaping the lives of those in their care.

This might seem like a strange passage – especially if we have been shaped by the American version of “nice Jesus who gives advice about how to live the best life possible.” If we have followed “life advice Jesus,” then this is hard to understand. Because clearly here Jesus has stood up – “told it like it is” to use my grandmother’s phrase – and entered into

direct confrontation with not just significant criticism – not just that – but also personal critique. Hypocrite. Blind Guide. Child of Hell. These are not phrases in Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People.

To understand this passage.

Gospel of righteousness – whole point here is to show us how to rightly relate to God and to one another. And to lead us into that way. And to provide the path. Jesus is revealing his purpose to us here – to open the door of the kingdom of heaven. And to travel over land and sea to gain us as converts.

It is possible to just shake down a couple of pieces of advice from this – keep your word. Don't give bad advice. But the point of the gospel isn't moralism – it is morally ordered human beings. Righteous humans – human beings who are shaped their lives – our lives – around loving God and loving other people. A gospel, not of moral correctness but of righteousness. And the way to do that, according to Jesus – is to follow Jesus, not the blind guides who are all over the place. And here – here we are on the path of righteousness.

Responses:

1) Glad I am not a teacher of the law or a Pharisee. I am glad I am not a prophet.

Wonder if this should be a text for seminary students and an ongoing meditation for those of us who stand up to speak to people about who God is and what God requires.

This is absolutely a text about the

Weightiness of leadership

Leadership matters – and yes that means church leadership. Making significant decisions that have an impact. No way around it. Don't want leaders so fearful they are paralyzed. Don't want them filled with such certitude that they think they can't make a mistake.

Jesus is steering a path here. And it is clear what he is doing.

Standing in the place of Ezekiel – using the word “woe” very specifically. Connecting dots between testaments and placing the Pharisees in the spotlight of the impact of leadership.

If a response is “leadership is weighty.” You are tracking with the righteousness of Jesus.

My goal for leaders – confidence in the presence of Jesus without certitude in our own rectitude.

- 2) **Spicy Jesus! Some people love spicy Jesus.** He is throwing around the woes and criticizing people and, as people say in Lancaster County – “telling it like it is! I like spicy Jesus – not just patting us on our heads – shaping and prodding and calling forth righteousness.

What I’m concerned about is when what happens is people say

See – I can say anything I want and act spicy!

Risks of talking like this – what happens to Jesus?

This is strategic engagement by Jesus – connecting himself to Ezekiel and them to the blind guides before the exile.

You ramp up language, you get a ramped up response.

Which is what we are experiencing in this country right now. A lot of ramped up language.

This is what we call the myth of redemptive violence. Conviction that the answer to violence is, well, violence.

Ends up with a man on the cross.

Christian conviction in a world filled with violence – is a man who is risen from the dead. It isn’t an army that issues forth to conquer the world.

Love action movies. Love the Marvel Cinematic Universe. For the DC people – I’ve tried. Honestly, I’m a Batman fan. But the MCU has me.

Latest one grapples with this question – what’s the answer to violence? I won’t spoil the movie – but there. And here – the ultimate answer isn’t the person with the biggest gun, the hardest punch, or even the smartest brain. Jesus knows that violence begets violence. And his prodding here ultimately results in his death. This is strategic engagement with the myth of redemptive violence to defeat it.

This passage is not an invitation to escalation – it is the entrance of Jesus into the lives that he describes here – blind, lost, closed doors – to open them. And for us -

Warning against escalation

- 3) **What Jesus really cares about - End result is redemption**

So – notice what Jesus accuses them of – shutting the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You want to know what ramps Jesus us – shutting the door of heaven in people’s faces.

And – if you know the story – these people are going to engineer Jesus dying on the cross, which does what? Opens the doors of the kingdom of heaven to the world.

End up at the table – where all of this comes together

If you are feeling the weight of leadership – in your family, in your workplace, at the church – come here to be fed.

If you have escalated something – and you need forgiveness

And if you want redemption in the kingdom of God –

Come here. To This Table.