

## **BITTER WORDS NEVER TASTED SWEETER**

**Ezekiel 2:1-3:3, 12-15**

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Officer Installation/Ordination Sunday

In the comedy “She’s Having a Baby,” actors Kevin Bacon and Elizabeth McGovern play a young couple making their way through the joyous trials of life. One of the more entertaining scenes takes place at the couple's wedding. The two are standing at the altar and the minister, a stoic elderly gentleman and not the least bit personal (and isn't that the way clergy are typically depicted on the silver screen? Why is that?) The minister muddles his way through the “do you's” as if reading a restaurant menu. They sound familiar at first: *Will thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife, in sickness and in health, till death do you part?*

Just as Bacon's character is about to answer, however, the voice drifts off in a dreamlike-state, as if we're getting a peek into the groom's subconscious. And the vows we now hear take a noticeable turn: *Will thou provide her with a four-bedroom, two and one half bath home? Will thou listen patiently to stories about kids' colds, shoes, kids' clothes, sore feet, and decorator checkbook covers?* The camera captures a beleaguered Kevin Bacon wiping sweat off his brow and then, without the least bit of confidence, musters a rather unconvincing “I do.”

“Overwhelmed” is probably the best way to describe him, don't you think? I guess that's why this scene still sticks out in my mind. Maybe it was also at the altar for us, or perhaps at some other point in our life, but chances are we've all felt that way before. In fact, I'm wondering if our seven newest elders could claim that sensation about right now. Just a few minutes ago they stood before you and essentially said “I do” to a long litany of questions; of responsibilities they are committing themselves to - *Do you trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior, acknowledging him Lord of all and head of the Church? Will you fulfill your office in obedience to Jesus Christ? Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?* I'm tempted to wonder if, like Bacon, they heard other questions in their head: *Do you promise to attend session meetings, even on freezing cold January mornings? Are you willing to take a stand on difficult and perhaps controversial issues, even when others may disagree with you? Do you promise to make needed budget cuts and replace burnt-out light bulbs and lock the church up on Easter Sunday?*

It is, after all, a big responsibility – being an elder. It's why we have worship services like this. Our congregation takes great care in prayerfully nominating and electing the individuals who serve as leaders on our session. All officers of the church are *ordained* to ministry. Ordination is literally a “setting apart” of individuals for specific tasks in ministry – meaning that being an elder is different from serving on some community board or agency. Individuals ordained to ministry are *called by God* just as clergy are. The “office” may be different, but the ministry is one and the same. And it is not to be taken lightly.

It seems to me that the prophet Ezekiel was just beginning to realize this in our scripture reading today. He, too, was called by God – to speak God's word to people in exile. You know the story. Their beautiful city Jerusalem destroyed, decimated; the

entire Hebrew nation carted off to live in captivity in Babylon. Their identity as God's people, like their city, in ruin.

Ezekiel was, in many ways, very much like you and me. He had a career – he was a priest, actually. He was married, had children, had a home. He and the rest of God's people had been living in Babylon for five years when one day, out of the blue, God called him to something special; something he would've never imagined in his wildest dreams. God called Ezekiel to speak God's word to the people and serve them only.

Now Ezekiel was no dummy. He knew that speaking on behalf of the Almighty was risky business. The Word of God, after all, may be what they people *need* to hear, but it isn't always what they *want* to hear. That's the rub. And what God's people needed to hear, apparently, was, as scripture puts it, "words of lamentation, mourning and woe." What rotten luck, eh? It's one thing, like the angel Gabriel, to get to bring a message "of good news and great joy" to a bunch of shepherds in the fields that first Christmas. It's something else to be faced delivering the kind of the message Ezekiel had to!

The beautiful thing about this story, though, is that God knew – God knew how hard it would be for Ezekiel to do what was being asked of him. So God equips the prophet with everything he needs to speak – only God does it in rather peculiar fashion. I mean, when was the last time you had to eat a scroll to get God's blessing?? Kind of strange, isn't it? I mean, of all the things God could've given Ezekiel, why a piece of rolled-up paper? And as if eating it wasn't strange enough, the prophet makes note that the scroll tastes "sweet as honey" - which seems odd for a scroll in the first place, much less one that contains all that lamentation and woe stuff.

There got to be something to it, but what? Many a wise mind has pondered this sweet scroll over the years, trying to figure it out. On one level, the scroll itself is the means by which the prophet receives the words he's to speak. By eating this scroll, Ezekiel internalizes the word of God – the very word he must share with the people. If he ever had the concern – as most servants of God do – that he wouldn't know what to say, wouldn't know where the words would come from, now those very words are literally a part of him, part of his flesh and blood; they are as close to him as his own insides.

But there's a deeper significance to the scroll, isn't there? Because it not only gives Ezekiel the actual words to say, but the power and the courage with which to say them. It equips him to share this message – a message that is now part of him – with boldness and confidence. It equips him with the ability to carry out this calling; a calling he would otherwise not be able to do on his own. That's precisely why some have taken to calling this eating of the scroll, most appropriately on this day, an "act of ordination" – a response to God's calling and an equipping to carry out that call.

Today, thousands and thousands of years later, Ezekiel and the story of his "ordination" has something to say to us, especially to our seven newest elders this morning. And while we can assure them that no one is going to make them eat any scrolls today, it is important to understand that God is calling *us* to things that are just as critical, just as important, and even perhaps just as treacherous as what God called Ezekiel to way back when. As crazy as it sounds, we can actually learn a few things from the tale of the prophet and his scroll.

Like the fact that sometimes *God calls us to do difficult things*. Serving on the session is not just about obtaining influence and power in the church. It is covenanting with God to act on God's behalf in the life of God's congregation. It is promising to do God's work and, in many different ways, to speak God's word. And often this sort of thing winds up clashing with those forces that would prefer things be done "they way they've always been." Often, following God's call compels us to latch on to that six-letter word that most churches relegate to four-letter word status: change. That's one thing the scroll teaches us.

Here's another one – how about the fact that *God enables us to do what we need to do when there's no way we could do it ourselves*. Just as the scroll gave Ezekiel the authority to speak God's word, no matter how bitter those words were, so ordination in our church grants elders and ministers the ability to carry out the many tasks and ministries that lay before them, no matter how difficult or challenging they may be. Elders move ahead with a huge capital campaign to renovate and expand a facility to meet the ever-growing needs of a congregation, despite some resistance from folks who like things the way they are. A session prayerfully considers whether the church should become actively involved in a controversial local missions initiative. The elders in charge of Christian Education and Nurture debate the idea of adopting a new curriculum model that will dramatically affect the content and structure of the church's heralded Sunday school ministry. All of these are accomplished not only through the people's determination and will, but the very God who calls them to serve in the first place.

There's one other thing that the scroll teaches us, and it's best summed up in a story you may have heard about a piano virtuoso and a little boy. The boy had arrived with his mother to a concert by the great Polish pianist Jan Paderewski. Once they were seated, the mother spotted a friend in the audience and walked down the aisle to greet her. Seizing the opportunity to explore the wonders of the concert hall, the little boy rose and eventually found his way through a door marked "NO ADMITTANCE."

When the house lights dimmed and the concert was about to begin, the mother returned to her seat and discovered that her son was missing. Suddenly, the curtains parted and spotlights focused on the impressive Steinway on the stage. In horror, the mother saw her little boy sitting at the keyboard, innocently picking out "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

At that moment the great piano master made his grand entrance. When he saw the boy sitting at his piano, he didn't miss a beat. He quickly moved to the piano and whispered in the boy's ear, "Don't quit, keep playing." Then leaning over, he reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon his right arm reached around to the other side of the child and he added an impressive run. Together the old master and the young novice transformed a most awkward situation into a wonderfully creative experience. The audience was mesmerized.

Don't you think that's the way it is with God sometimes? What we accomplish on our own is hardly noteworthy. We try our best, but the results aren't exactly graceful, flowing music. And then God steps in and puts God's arms on either side of us and makes the music all the more beautiful.

And that is what Ezekiel learned at his scroll-eating; that is what our seven newest elders have experienced this morning as they have been ordained and installed:

that *God doesn't call the equipped. God equips the called.* God doesn't gather people who already have everything they need – God brings us together and gives us what we need as elders, as ministers, as servants; to make a difference in this world, one day at a time.

So as we ordain and install these elders this morning, as we gather here to worship our God, we are left asking ourselves that all-important question: what are the words written on the scroll God lays before us? What might God be calling each of us to do in the life of this church? May God guide us as we discern what those words are, and as we seek to speak that word to a world in desperate need of hearing it. So elders - welcome to the ministry! All church members – welcome to the ministry! Thanks be to God! AMEN.