

It is hard to listen to a prophet, especially in the good times. When things are going well, the stocks are up, the economy is doing well, and we just got a raise at work, we don't want to hear about God being upset with the way things are, and that God is going to destroy everything. I think prophets do better in the bad times when all has been lost, because when we are in the worst of it, at the very least, we listen in the hope that something better is coming along.

Ezekiel has been a prophet through it all – through the good times and through the bad times. In the “good times”, he told the Israelites that God was going to destroy Jerusalem because of their behavior and they didn't believe him. They believed God was committed to the dynasty of the kings descended from David and the sacredness and indestructibility of Jerusalem. They thought it didn't matter what they did. God would always hold them up. They didn't count on how God would hold them up.

And then when Jerusalem fell, and the Israelites are in exile, Ezekiel is there too - still being a prophet. This is where we come in with the Old Testament reading this morning. Jerusalem is under siege and has most likely fallen. The prophecies have come true. At this point, Ezekiel is trying to renew the Israelites' trust in God at a time when they have lost everything.

In this morning's reading, Ezekiel is speaking out against Pharaoh and Egypt. Egypt is a traditional enemy of Israel - think about Moses leading his people through the Red Sea away from the Pharaoh and his army. However, at this point, Jerusalem has been attacked and Egypt is still there. Actually, the present pharaoh tried to help Jerusalem, but failed. Many of the Israelites are in Egypt as exiles and life is not so bad there. It is a mighty nation with many provisions and an emperor that claims that he is divine. However, Ezekiel is trying to protect his people from wanting to make Egypt their new nation, and he issues a warning. Egypt is not so wonderful – in fact it will fall. The Lord tells Ezekiel to warn Pharaoh that he is like Assyria, which is a fallen nation. He uses the metaphor of a cedar of Lebanon. This cedar has fair branches and forest shade. Its top reaches the clouds. Its roots grow deep into the rich earth and are nourished by the rivers that flow around it. The boughs are large and the branches are long.

There is abundant water in the shoots. Many benefit from its shade. Birds make their nest in its boughs. Animals of the fields give birth to their young under the branches. In its shade all the great nations lived. In this comparison a great nation comes to mind - one that has an abundance of things.

Its people live in good surroundings and they are taken care of. Great buildings are built and in them wonderful things happen. The world is advanced. Human rights are upheld. The people do work that fulfills their souls. But the nation forgets. It forgets that the point is not to become the most wonderful nation. The point is not to become the best and most wonderful nation – the one that does the best things for people and that makes the most money. The leader of the nation is not divine. The nation forgets that God is the source of all life and in only God can we be truly satisfied. And then the great tree falls. The nation is conquered. The tree is felled. Foreigners from the most horrible of nations cut it down and leave it. Its branches fall on the mountains and in all the valleys. The boughs lie broken in all the water courses. All the people go away from its shade and leave it. Birds settle on its trunk but it does not say that they make their nests.

Wild animals lodge in its boughs but the animals of the fields no longer give birth under its branches. There is some life within the fallen tree but it is very different from what was there before. This will be the fate of Egypt. Egypt will not be the salvation for the Israelites. Many of them were there in exile and I can believe that the Israelites were tempted by the lure of Egypt. It is hard when things are bad. You want to choose the first good thing that comes along even if it is not so good. The Israelites were tempted to stay in Egypt and perhaps to look to Egypt as the next great nation. They had lost everything and here was a place where they could live. Here was a nation that was still great. Perhaps the Pharaoh of Egypt had something in saying that he was divine. Perhaps this is who they should be worshiping instead of the God of their Fathers and Mothers. Ezekiel is calling them back to a place where they are to trust in their God. Trust in God who will never give you anything fake. Trust in a God who will always be with you. Pharaoh and the city of Egypt were built on pride and when you build your life on reaching to the tops of the clouds for the sake of doing so, you will end in death. Where are those places in our lives where we turn to the quick fix or the first fix that we can find? When we are in trouble and find a way out, do we ask if this a solution that takes us away from God or do we cling to it as if we had nothing else? Do we not see or think about what we are doing because we are panicking? We want to find the solution out of a mess. We want to find the place where we are once again all right and everything is safe. We forget that only God can guide us to real safety. In God we trust. This is the message that Ezekiel wants his people to hear – Trust in God relentlessly no matter what happens.

Our mission in life is not to be part of the great nation that touches the tops of the clouds but to be part of God's nation. The crazy thing is that God's nation may well be one that touches the tops of the clouds but it takes constant prayer and connection with God to make sure we do not go off in the ways of the world. The world can be very deceiving and when we are down and scared. We run after the first thing that comes along. It may be a job which looks good on paper but doesn't feel quite right. It may a project that we are invited to be part of that is really feeding our ego and not our soul. It may be a deal that will get us the money we need, but is a little bit shady. It may be the numbness of drugs and alcohol. The world offers us many choices but we must be careful – sometimes the things that seem good or that seem as if they are the only thing available will take us away from God. They are many choices in the world that are not based on how God asks us to live. If we do not proceed with God as our base, with God in our heart and with God as our life, we can easily get distracted.

Prosperity is not bad. Good times do not need to be avoided. But everything we approach should be grounded in our desire for God and in prayer. With careful prayer and consideration, we will know if something is right. We will know if it is of God. If we can hold our fears and the ways of the world at bay, and truly offer ourselves to God, we will know the path God calls us to take. This will be the path of life not the path of death. This will be the path of growth and joy. This is the path we find when we trust in God when God is at the root of all our desires.

Ezekiel was a prophet of God who pointed his people back to God, the source of greatness, the source of all that is really true. Ezekiel points us to the same place. Do not be distracted by the tall trees with boughs that stretch far, whose tops touch the tops of the clouds and whose branches shade the nations of the world but are built on pride and the things that lead to death. Instead look for the places that give life – that spread the unconditional love of God, the places that say "I welcome you no matter who you are". God's ways are very different from the ways of the world. Trust in God relentlessly. God is with us through the fallings of the cities, the failings of our lives and crumbling of the ways of the world. God loves us and will hold us up always.