

The Creature on the Fringe

The Original Rebels

Relentless Series: Laetare Sunday

Lent Week 4 - March 27th, 2022

Rev. Rynn Parraw

1 Samuel 27

Psalm 119:1-16

Ezekiel 4

Matthew 3:1-4:11

Ephesians 2:11-18

The Bible is a revolutionary book. Not only do the people constantly rebel against God's commands, but God rebels against injustices, the people rebel against human authority, and the Bible itself rebels against the status quo and norms of society. The original rebels are God, the people, and the Word itself. And as the incarnate Word, we can intuit what to expect from Yeshua as that very energy incarnated in human form.

God is a complicated God and often that leaves us confused. He demands obedience to the rules while constantly pushing the boundaries, inviting us into more, and sending major characters to change the game. When to know to follow the rebel and when to hold our ground is the personal conflict every soul struggles with.

Why doesn't God make it more clear? Free will! He offers options and opportunities constantly, but they are all just invitations. I believe He holds a prayer for what He hopes for you but always throws you the veto rights... except when He exercises His own ultimate veto rights over our free-will choices. No wonder we can't ever figure out where the uncrossable line is, who to follow, and what new information to take into our hearts.

For beings who want to love God wholeheartedly,
live life in the fullness of who God made you to be,
and follow God's plan with every fibre of your being,
it is a nuanced journey of constant discernment.

Right from the get-go, human beings have had trouble following the rules. Whether it's the one and only rule, or one of hundreds, we will find a way to bend it, betray it, and eventually break it. We started with just the one: don't eat that one particular fruit. And yet, here we are... NOT in the garden.

There have always been repercussions for not doing what we are told. But I still wonder what exactly that first sin was. Was it the eating of the forbidden fruit? Was it the unwillingness to take responsibility by passing the buck (Adam to Eve, Eve to the serpent)? Would the story have ended differently if in that moment the offending parties had owned up to their actions and simply asked God how to make it right with Him? Was the sin the action or the cover-up? The disobedience or the revelation of a dishonest nature? How different would it all have been if they sought reconciliation instead of hiding?

So the one was replaced with ten commandments, but that was too much. That was followed by 614 laws - way too much. So Yeshua made it easy on us and simplified it back down to two. How you doing with that? Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, and love your neighbour as yourself... we haven't seemed to figure out what that means, yet.

But, that's not that the kind of rebels we are talking about here, not really. Although the picture of being cast from the Garden, and even exiled from the promised land, is a potent image to exemplify our loneliness and how much of the path we Christians spend feeling ostracized and abandoned by God, the rebellion I am talking about is not rebelling against God, but *for Him*.

When we are willing to wander off in search of that deeper, greater meaning. When we are willing to stand up for and against the injustices that are committed against God's people, which of course include all living beings, and also the injustices committed in God's name.

There have been so few who have successfully stood up against God's church and thrived as a result. But that's exactly what the prophets were repeatedly called to do. One of my all-time favourites is Martin Luther. The devout monk who found the church's extortion of its partitioners absolutely intolerable and nailed a very public denouncement on the cathedral doors just before Sunday mass for all to see. Most times in history this

would have ended very badly for Mr. Luther... but in this moment, the people resonated with his message and started to join the protest. This was only the beginning and took on the name of Protest-ants. Thus was born the Christian church, separated from the Catholic rule.

For most of history, to call out the church was to take on the government. If they were not the same entity, they backed each other and protected their power. But, as little Christs, which is what being a Christian means - we are meant to be following his example. You will be hard-pressed to find too long of a stretch in any of the gospels where he is not doing exactly that: calling out the hypocrisy and strayed practices of the ruling classes of the faith, the extortion of the leaders, the warped teachings of the preachers, and the hierarchy of teachings based on human commentary rather than the channelled word of God which was the scriptures.

Yeshua was a continuation of a very long line of checks and balances that God provided through prophets - the original rebels. Prophet rebels found in the stories of John the Baptist, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Isaiah recount straight-up strange men doing absolutely absurd, bizarre and sometimes obnoxious things, in the name of God.

These rebels for God had no say in what they were about to do. Can you imagine receiving the message telling you your great purpose and mission in life and finding out it involves laying naked in a public space on your side for more than a year and a month, only to flip over and do it again on the other side, all the while cooking your food over dried human dung (though the message does not clarify whose)? Can you imagine being told to do that?

The greater question is how long of watching this was productive? I get that the messages needed to be theatrical and extreme to catch people's attention, but how long do you think it took before people dismissed Ezekiel for just being the weird guy? Did anyone actually get the point of the message? Was change the result, or just a sick prank being pulled on the prophet humiliating himself because God told him to? I'll bet we all feel a little like that sometimes. If anyone was in a position to be questioning God's methods with "why me!?!", I'd say it was Ezekiel.

Although he also ate scrolls and commanded dry bones to come to life, Ezekiel often got the short straw when it came to drawing performance pieces to display God's

intentions. Now Ezekiel was a well-respected prophet who was known for truth-telling and his word already carried weight. When he spoke, people listened. So why the theatrics? Why have to play it all out for the people to show them some obscure message that most of them were not distilling from the performance?

Isaiah had to walk butt-naked for three years prophesying with his robes cut off too short. Jeremiah had to wear an ox yoke when he prophesied and was instructed to bury his underwear under a rock by the river at one point, which in the context of these other stories doesn't seem too weird. So the next time you feel like God is asking you to do something silly, or you try to challenge, like Jonah, that God could do it without you, just keep in mind: at least you don't have to bury your underwear.

And although all of them went through some pretty humiliating experiences trying to get the messages across, I'd say Hosea kind of had it the worst. He was told to marry a prostitute (which technically disqualified him from functioning as a man-of-God), and not one he loved, they did not get along at all. On top of that, he was given some horrible names to give to his children. Why do I think that's the worst one? Because the example set is that God can make you stay in an awful, abusive marriage and not only did Hosea suffer through the performance but those kids were cursed from the day they were born as children of a prophet living in an abusive marriage, with awful names they have to carry throughout their lives. It begs the question: why, God? Was there not another way, but to embody the example for the people? What kind of example does that set?

These stories are not shared to help you excuse awful experiences as being 'God's plan', but rather they are shared to show how these rebellious spirits were willing to do what it took to get the people's attention, to follow a command that directly betrayed the customs of their faith at God's behest, and were willing to take on society, the church, and even the government, in order to get people back on track and back to the heart of God, even though God could have done it a different way.

The purpose of the stories is never that we must be willing to suffer for God, but rather that we are willing to stand up and stand out. We were never asked to fit in, and acceptance was not promised. The priests and prophets who lived cast from society yet serving them, were the rebels of the faith, rebels *for* God, who held the whole thing accountable. Rarely did they offer new news, or good news. Usually, their messages were about correction, to bring people back into alignment.

Then came John the Baptist... We have no context for John other than being born to elderly parents and the second cousin of Yeshua. No origin story for his message or methods, other than he just was. He was a strange guy, feral almost, aggressive in his teachings which were all about love, and brazenly, unabashedly willing to challenge anyone who missed the point of the prophesied promises of God. And, despite being his cousin and commissioned to prepare the way for the messiah, actually didn't know they were one and the same until afterwards.

John was a baptizer, and he baptized. Yeshua was his cousin, so he welcomed him with open, albeit wet, arms. He baptized Yeshua because that's what John did. Despite being a prophet, until that moment he was clueless, and he even knew what to look for! Suddenly it doesn't seem so bad that the regular people couldn't tell if Yeshua was or wasn't what he was rumoured to be. Even the educated and prepared had to take a minute and experience divine revelation, or intervention, in order to connect the dots. Until the dove-shaped spirit of God descended in the baptism, Yeshua had been operating under the radar. This was his initiation into public ministry.

But, long before any of that - not just in bucking societal norms, anti-social behaviour, and bizarre displays that border on performance art pieces - before any of that, we have a seemingly perfectly normal little boy, who right from the get-go, walked the line perfectly.

Yeshua was a rebel through a through, from beginning to end. Not just the creature on the fringes of society, but a creature unto himself. Born of a woman, but not a man. A mixed hybrid of divine and human, the best of both, yet fully both. Not only was he conceived in spiritual rapture without any of the 'natural' mechanisms, but he wasn't even born normally. Out in a barn, lying in a manger, surrounded by only the purest of hearts who could see him for what he truly was, aka animals. Humans couldn't even witness his glory in the beginning.

Fast forward a few years, having been hidden away to be raised in Egypt - the land God promised never to make His people return to - a worldly little fellow one can imagine, coming of age and coming to the temple on pilgrimage. The twelve-year-old runs ahead of his parents and off to the temple. Doesn't seem so bad, right? Expect that walk was a 40-day journey from Egypt to Jerusalem. The same walk the people took following Moses

through the Red Sea in the Exodus. The story doesn't say how far ahead he was, or how long he was 'missing'. They didn't know he went to the temple, but when they found him he was schooling the local teachers. Keep in mind, this is not some backcountry little church, this is the main synagogue, the point of the pilgrimage and a 12-yr-old is showing the leading preachers what the depths of the scriptures have to say.

So, as much as he didn't step into his public ministry until his thirties, another 17 years later, he was always living that rebellious truth and doing what he came to do. But his rebellion wasn't to demolish and revolt, it was to dive deeper and reform. Leading the way for men like Martin Luther, to call out the inadequacies and inaccuracies in a way that brought things back to God.

In our world, we so often see rebellion not as an act of reform and reclamation, but as an abandonment, throwing the baby out with the bathwater. And God has been abandoned by the people. Consistently throughout Yeshua's story, he called the leaders of the faith out on the ways that they were making it impossible for the people to follow God. They were the tripping point, not the embodiment of what to do.

He was intolerant of the corruption and extortion that plagued the temple. The 'business' of church took the heat of his scorn more than once, usually through his eloquent words that stung like a scorpion, but when that was not enough he even lost his resolve and full-on threw money changers' tables in the temple courtyard. That may sound 'uncharacteristic', but it was true to form.

The law taught that you must give the perfect sacrifice, the best your herd and home had to offer. But with the long pilgrimages to the temple, by the time you arrived, your perfect offering wasn't so unblemished anymore. The vendors in the temple courtyard were shaming people into thinking that their best was no longer good enough and you could trade it in for an upgrade being sold at exorbitant prices. This is what he took issue with. The temple had become a market place teaching people that the best of what God gave them was no longer good enough and shaming them into paying crippling prices for replacements. I'd throw a fit too!

We have the ultimate rebel as our leader and founder. The difference is integrity. To be a rebel *for* God is all about integrity. Being the embodiment of it, the example of what God wants for His people and in integrity with who you were designed to be even if

that does mean walking naked for a few years screaming about things no one wants to hear. We choose who we follow, but we do not choose our missions.

Yeshua spent a full 40 days in the desert facing the depths of the truth of who he was. He needed to face those temptations before stepping up onto his public platform to make sure that he was right with God and incorruptible. That was necessary to be able to rebuke the leaders with authority. His authority came from God, but it came through because he took the time to make sure nothing was in the way. He was in alignment, he was purified, proven, and ready.

Then, when he did come out from that desert and started talking to ostracized groups, he was accused of all sorts of things. They tried to dismiss him for who he communed with, but his defence was that he was there for those who needed to find their way to God, so of course he was a rebel on the fringes of society. It made him relevant and made his message timeless.

Yeshua was a rebel born in a manger,
 spent 40 days in the desert (more than once),
 a rebel in defence of the church,
 lived as a nomad with no home,
 hung out with the outcasts
 and refused to even obey the law of death.

The moral of Yeshua's story is to:
 step-up and boldly, bravely,
 be who you were designed to be.

Soli Deo Gloria,

Selah