

July 4, 2021
“Finding (Y)our Footing”
Ezekiel 2:1-5 / Mark 6:1-13
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

You may have seen the BBC video showing ibex, the species of wild goats that live in the mountainous regions of Europe, north central Asia and northern Africa, scaling a near-vertical dam in Italy – just to get to the life-sustaining salts and minerals found in the rock used to build the dam. Rather than tell you more about it, let me just show you ([youtube.com/watch?v=RG9TMn1FJzc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RG9TMn1FJzc)).

The video apparently came out about five years ago, but like most viral phenomena, I just stumbled across it last week! I've now learned more about ibex in the past few days than I've known my whole life.

Did you know, like all goats, that they have cloven hooves comprised of two split toes? The outer part is a hard shell and parabolic-shaped (for strength), and the inner part is soft and rubbery, with a rough textured surface (for flexibility and traction). The split toes act independently, allowing the ibex to adjust instantaneously to a wide variety of different surfaces. Their hooves have sharp edges and concave undersides that act like suction cups. They have slip-stopping dewclaws like dogs. They are extremely nimble, and can jump more than six feet straight up from a standing position. All of these features allow them to make what would be an impossible, unassisted climb for any of us look like a walk in the park. They are climbing machines, and not only that, they almost never fall! Unbelievable!

You gotta love the guy in the video: “When I see a steep slope, I'm terrified . . . but then I'm no ibex!” We are not ibex, of course, but we're talking about hooves this morning, Calvary. And we're talking about feet.

We heard from Eriks the words of the priest and prophet Ezekiel, set in the narrative context of his divine call and a series of fantastic visions. And set in the historical context of exile following the first Babylonian siege of Jerusalem (circa 597 BCE). All leading to a message from God, at first, of lamentation and punishment for the Israelites' idolatrous

behavior, eventually giving way to a vision of blessing and new life—including the famous vision of the valley of dry bones in chapter 37, where the dead live again.

“God said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when God spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet.” Hear that: Set me on my feet. Set me on solid ground.

I’ve spent the past two months coaching Gabe’s baseball team—the Blue Rocks, inspired by the Wilmington minor-league team. One of the things we constantly tell the kids is to be “baseball ready.” To make sure they’re in good position, whether playing defense in the field or getting ready to bat. If we were in person (which, by the way, we expect to be soon!), I could just show you, but it generally means your feet are spread shoulder-length apart and planted firmly on the ground, bending your knees comfortably to lower your center of gravity, keeping your back straight with your head up, and shifting your weight a little forward. As with most sports, this basic position allows players to respond quickly in any direction.

“And when God spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet.” Spiritually speaking, this is Ezekiel’s ready position. It represents a strong foundation, a position of confidence, of preparedness for the prophetic work God is calling him to do.

And the text goes on, God’s reminder to Ezekiel that his message may not be well received among the “rebellious” and “stubborn” people of Israel, verse 5 and following: “Whether they hear or refuse to hear . . . they shall know that there has been a prophet among them. And you, O mortal, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words, . . . You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear.” In other words, stay strong. Stay on your feet. Find your footing and keep it. Foundation and determination. Confidence and resilience.

We get more of that same message – “whether they hear or refuse to hear” – in Mark’s Gospel text. Jesus is effectively rejected in Nazareth, his hometown, because all the people who knew him when he was coming up can’t believe that sweet little Jesus, you know, little Jesus whom they remember when he was “this tall,” this “son of Mary and

brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon,” could possibly exude such wisdom or demonstrate such deeds of power.

A prophet without honor, Jesus leaves, unable to do anything more than heal a few sick people on his way out of town.

And then he sends his disciples out into the surrounding villages, two-by-two, giving them authority over unclean spirits. He orders them to pack light. No food, no bag, no money, just a tunic, a pair of sandals, and a staff—presumably to support a whole lot of walking. The disciples, of course, are used to that.

And Jesus give them this advice, “If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you (think Ezekiel), as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” Shake the dust off your feet. Again with the feet!

In other words, as I understand it, you will be discouraged but don't let discouragement stop you. You will be afraid, but don't let fear consume you. Don't give up. You have work to do. Faithfulness is more important than effectiveness. Stay ready. Stay on your feet and keep walking. Stay on your feet and keep sharing the good news, the prophetic word, that hope is real. That all manner of healing is possible. That wholeness is possible. That reconciliation is possible. That new life is possible. That life, as Ezekiel later envisions it, can arise even from dry bones.

This is determination, friends. This is resilience in the face of adversity, frustration, anger, fear, despair, harm. This is the ibex scaling a vertical dam in Italy, because their lives depend on it. Again, confidence and resilience. Foundation and determination. Find your spiritual footing and do everything you can to keep it, controlling what you can in the midst of so much that you can't. Because your lives, our lives, depend on it.

It's been a rough year all around. For our family, this July 4th weekend marks an anniversary we'd just as soon forget—when Amy first experienced symptoms that she thought was just a urinary tract infection that wouldn't clear up, but turned out to be cancer.

It's been a rough year for our community. As for everyone else, ongoing Covid restrictions and social isolation, the heightened fear and intensity and polarization, the physical, mental and emotional toll, the economic hardship (including for our congregation and for the Calvary Center); ongoing questions and challenges surrounding the future of our church building; ongoing uncertainty and injustice within the United Methodist Church, General Conference even further delayed; and yes, truth be told, now on the heels of what was a difficult pastoral appointment.

And that's not to mention the overwhelming brokenness in the world around us. So many people and the planet itself crying out for relief, for sustenance, for respect, for justice, for peace, for life. I don't need to tell you.

Throughout this past year-plus, in so many ways, the ground beneath us has buckled, and continues to buckle. We have lost our balance. We have lost our footing. Our feet are tired. We are tired.

But in the face of such exhausting and sobering collective reality, and in the face of whatever heaviness weighs on and in your life, God says to you, to us, again and again and again: O mortals, O mortals (which is to say, have some perspective, remember that you only have this one fragile life), O mortals, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And graced by and filled with my Spirit—my faith-fueling, hope-reviving, love-expanding, life-giving Spirit—I am setting you on your feet. Maybe not feet like an ibex, but I am setting you on your feet. I am setting you on solid ground. I am setting you in the ready position. Are you ready?

Friends, may we be ready. And may it be so.