

A Prophet Among Them (Ezekiel 2:1-5; II Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13)

Since our lectionary scriptures for today focus on prophets and prophesying, let me begin by asking you, what image comes to your mind when you think of a prophet? Most of us probably picture an old guy with a beard, a walking stick, and sandals, right? Most of us further picture this old guy as a kinda "odd duck," out of step with the rest of the world of his time, the Older Testament days.

But all this is a false impression of a prophet for a couple of reasons. First, even in the Older Testament, women were also prophets. Secondly, there were prophets in the New Testament as well: for example, John the Baptist and Anna. In fact, Jesus even referred to himself as a prophet. Jesus applied the words of another prophet, the Prophet Isaiah, to himself when he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19)--all the work of a prophet. Furthermore, in today's gospel lesson, after beginning his ministry, when Jesus returned to his home town, no one wanted to listen to what he had said, even though they acknowledged his wisdom and his acts of power. Thus Jesus commented, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house" (Mark 6:4). A third reason why our impression of a prophet is in need of revision is that the New Testament refers to disciples or followers of Jesus as prophets.

For example, right after Jesus referred to himself as a prophet, he sent his disciples out in pairs, and Jesus sent them in pairs because according to Jewish law, two were required for witnessing--and that's what a prophet does--witnesses or gives testimony about God. Also, Jesus instructed his disciples to do the same prophetic work he had been doing--calling people to repentance, healing, etc. Also, the Acts of the Apostles reminded Christians that God said, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." Furthermore, consider some of the Apostle Paul's instructions to the Christians of the church at Corinth:

"Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy" (I Corinthians 14:1).

"...those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church....One who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues...." (I Corinthians 14:3-5).

"For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged" (I Corinthians 14:31).

"So, my friends, be eager to prophesy" (I Corinthians 14:39).

So what this all means is that we, as followers of Jesus--we, upon whom God has poured out his Holy Spirit--we ordinary persons, gathered here this morning, we are called, meant, to be, prophets. And so, you see, a prophet is someone who can look like Shirley or Willis or Jacob or Emily or Mark. A prophet can look like any of us. A prophet can wear a hat like Madolyn Tillman, carry a walking stick like Jeri Schreiber, or wear a baseball uniform like Tristian Winsett.

We are all called to be prophets. But, of course, that doesn't mean that we all are prophets. We are only prophets if we are living our lives as prophets. And so, our next dilemma is to be sure we understand what a prophet does.

A prophet is someone who is a link between God and humanity. First of all, a prophet speaks on God's behalf to humanity.

If we want to be a prophet, we must spend time with God, listening to him, getting to really know him. Then we must really be committed to him, willing to speak for him and act on his behalf, no matter the consequences, even if humanity doesn't want to hear what God has to say. Desmond Tutu once spoke to a group consisting of seminary faculty and students, good, well-meaning American Christians. After his speech he welcomed questions, and one person asked what else Americans of good will could do besides continuing to support the economic boycott against the apartheid government of South Africa. Bishop Tutu's answer bothered many who heard it. He said that we needed to be concerned not only with the injustice in South Africa but also with the injustice in our own land, especially our American military industry, our own economic system, and our racism. There was some murmuring in the crowd, for some thought that he had broken some hospitality code. But what this humble Christian prophet had actually

done was called us to look at our own lives within the context of what God has said is good and just. Prophets are called and sent to change people--to get them to stop going the way they're going--to repent--to change and begin living according to God's will.

If we want to be a prophet, at times, we will be afflicting the comfortable. At other times, however, we will be comforting the afflicted. A minister was flying out of Tampa, Florida in late afternoon, just before sunset. She was seated on the front row, and there was an empty seat beside her. Thus the flight attendant sat down next to the minister for the take off. As the minister looked out the runway, she saw that the entire western sky was a blaze of glory, and she was wide-eyed in awe. It was one of the most magnificent arrays of color she had ever seen. "Look," she said. "Look at the sunset!" The stewardess glanced casually out the window and then mumbled, "Yes, it happens almost every time I fly out of here." So, when the stewardess got up to serve everyone, the minister began to pray for her. And later in the flight, when the stewardess next sat down again, the minister could just sense that the stewardess was a different person, for now she wanted to talk. She told the minister that she had just received word that her mother, a cancer patient, was not going to live much longer. And then the two women began talking about the presence, the love, and the care of God--how his everlasting arms were around her and her mother in their time of need.

Yes, if we want to be a prophet, we must speak and act on God's behalf--afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted--turning them all toward and drawing them closer to God.

But, secondly, if we want to be a prophet, we must also speak and act on humanity's behalf to God. Thus, just as it is important for us to spend time with God, so too we must also spend time with humanity, listening to those around us, really getting to know those around us. Then we must be committed to them, willing to speak for them and act on their behalf, again, no matter the consequences. We must pray for them, as Moses prayed for people, as Jesus prayed for people: "Father, forgive them."

I'm personally trying to do a better job at being a prophet. For example, last week I was with a group of persons from different churches, and the

topic of this Sunday's worship came up. We talked about how some churches would be having elaborate patriotic extravaganzas for their worship services. But I mustered up my prophetic courage and said that as much as we love our country, on Sunday morning in God's house, our primary purpose should be worshipping God. After all, did not God instruct us to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy? I'm going to try to speak up for God more.

I'm also going to try to do a better job at speaking up for all of you to God. From now until the end of the year, I plan to be more intentional in going to God on your behalf. I plan to pray specifically for each one of you for a week. Prior to that week, I will invite you to share with me any thanksgivings as well as any particular needs you would like me to lift up on your behalf throughout the week. What you share will be completely confidential--well, except for with God, for I will be very intentional and specific in praying for you and your needs all week. By the end of the year, my goal is to do this for each and every one of you.

I invite you to join me in giving serious thought to accepting your calling as a prophet. It may seem impossible for you to live your life as a prophet. You may feel that you are too imperfect or that you have too little knowledge of God or humanity. You may feel that you don't have the time to live as God's prophet. You may feel that you don't want to upset anyone or get anyone angry with you. You may not feel that you will be successful. But, remember our gospel lesson for today. As Jesus sends us out to be his prophets, he tells us that we don't need to take anything with us--not perfection or complete knowledge or a completely free schedule or great bravery. He tells us, "take nothing," for his presence and power will travel with us and will be more than enough. And he tells us that we aren't even to worry about whether or not those around us listen to us and as a result repent and change.

Friends, when people are around us, they should know that they have been in the presence of someone who loves God enough to try to faithfully speak on his behalf to them and someone who loves them enough to try to faithfully speak on their behalf to God. They should know, as our Old Testament lesson for today expresses it, "that there has been a prophet among them" (Elijah 2:5). Amen.