

The Role of Prophecy in Your Life

2 Kings 2: 1-2; 6-14

Luke 9:51-62

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Last Sunday, Jen Pearson preached on the story of the prophet Elijah. In a standoff, he defeated the priests of Baal, false prophets who were determined to exterminate the faith of Abraham and Moses.

We usually think of prophets as being fortunetellers but prophecy in the Old Testament was really about the here and now. God's people were called to make the hard decision to submit to God's will before facing and then addressing the often unpleasant realities of the present times. (Think of modern day prophets like Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King.)

God can always be counted on to send the right prophet at the right time whenever the political and religious establishments defy God by circling the wagons to protect their status and power. As it turned out, the Old Testament prophets, including Elijah and his protégé Elisha, were often treated like pariahs by the power elites. As far as they were concerned, the prophets were dangerous troublemakers. Whenever a prophet stood in the marketplace and used the formula, "Thus saith the Lord," before speaking truth to power, the kings and high priests would quickly confront them.

"Just who do you think you are?" they'd ask. "How dare you defy our wisdom and policies! We alone know the ins and outs of statecraft and business! At best you're being unpatriotic, at worst you're talking treason!"

Someone once said God's prophets, like the Maytag repair man, were the loneliest men in town. No one wanted to listen to them because they spoke the truth that always hurts. To discredit the prophets, the kings and temple priests would publicly ridicule them... and worse.

You remember after he defeated the priests of Baal, the wicked Queen Jezebel passed a death sentence on Elijah. Fearful, Elijah ran for his life and hid in a cave. That's when God went looking for Elijah and came to him, not in a great wind, earthquake or fire but in the sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard that silent voice calling out his name, he could only humble himself and stand at the entrance of the cave to receive his newest instructions: go back and confront Jezebel once again, even though it seems like a losing cause.

Question: what's the difference between a real prophet and a false prophet? In a nut shell, false prophets advocate self-serving solutions everybody wants to hear because it makes them feel good. On the other hand, true prophets usually tell people what they don't want to hear because it means they have to change. False prophets assure everybody that everything's on track and getting better. True prophets warn any success and prosperity, gained at the

expense of others, should never be seen as proof of God's favor. Instead of validation, there will be consequences if God's people don't listen and repent.

Far from only being God's microphone, the prophets were also singled out to be drawn into God's most intimate thoughts and feelings. They experienced God's unconditional love for his people but they also felt God's righteous wrath for their sin.

Last Sunday, Jen quoted John O'Donahue's definition of sin, "a woundedness and the poison coming from that wound that we refuse to allow God to heal."

That is one of the best explanations of sin I ever heard. Sin as a self inflicted wound, poisoning our relationships with God, our neighbors and ourselves. Unfortunately, instead of asking God to heal us, we let our wounds fester whenever we continue doing things we should never be doing. The alcoholic continues to drink, the bigot continues to hate and the self righteous continue wallowing in pride. Isn't that the definition of insanity?

They say sin is a symptom of our fallen human nature. Another way of putting it, sin is a symptom of our insanity, doing the same self-destructive things over and over again even though we continue being miserable. The Good News is, even though we are still sinners, Christ died for us and even though we continue to sin, God sends us prophets to talk sense and lead us back to sanity.

Another question: Why do we still resist each time God reaches out to heal us? Probably because we think when we submit to God, we must surrender our freedom to do as we please. Ironically, when we decide to surrender our freedom, we finally become free to let God heal our self inflicted wounds and make us whole again. To be sure, God never forces us to be healed. God always patiently stands at the door and knocks, waiting for us to be who God wants us to be and go where God wants us to go.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus came to that point in his ministry when he had to make the hard decision whether or not to be the Suffering Christ and go to Jerusalem and face his rendezvous with the cross. (Never think Jesus only struggled with his ultimate destiny in Gethsamne. Every day, from the time of his baptism, he lived with the specter of his crucifixion.)

Along the way, three would-be disciples promised to follow Jesus wherever he went but first, each asked to be excused to go back home to settle his personal affairs. At this point in his life, Jesus didn't have any time for wishy-washy commitments.

To one, he said, "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have their nests but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head." To another, he said, "Let the dead bury their own dead, as for you, go out to proclaim the kingdom of God." To the third, Jesus said, "No one who puts his hand on the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Jesus was intentionally being harsh, putting costly demands on these men for their own good. Each man wanted to set conditions on his discipleship before following Jesus. Each time Jesus' response was the same: for your own sakes, don't hesitate or try to negotiate your call to discipleship. You must make the decision to be either all in or all out.

We see something similar in the story of Elijah's protégé Elisha. At first Elisha hemmed and hawed when he was invited to stay with Elijah. Then he got serious. After slaughtering his two oxen, he broke up his plow to make firewood to roast the meat for his men. For all intents and purposes, Elisha burned his bridges behind him before starting his new life as a prophet of God. Much later, his mentor Elijah gave Elisha ample opportunities stay behind but each time Elisha answered, "As the Lord lives and as long as you yourself live, I will not leave you."

For his faithfulness, Elisha inherited a double share of Elijah's Spirit, just before Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.

We need to hear these stories of the great prophets, as well as the stories of all the would-be disciples. Knowing these stories clears our heads and informs our decision-making. Since there are so many things in this world, material, emotional and relational, competing for our attention, we need to listen hard to God's prophets, challenging us to choose the better way even if it costs us something, even if it gets us in trouble. We may lose everything but ultimately we gain everything: the freedom to know, love and serve God.

Paradoxically, knowing, loving and serving God grants you the freedom to do whatever you please. Remember Saint Francis of Assisi's instructions his disciples? "Love God, then do what you want."

When you love God you want to do the right thing. You want to care for others, you want to take your responsibility for the worlds problems. You want to be brave and assertive. More than anything, you want God's will to be done here on earth as it is in heaven.

It has letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul wrote, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

Can you imagine, right after the Civil War, the liberated slaves deciding to go back to the plantation to resume their old way of life under their white masters? It sounds crazy but isn't that what we do? Christ has freed us but we still act like slaves. For that reason, be grateful our salvation is not dependent on us being good but on God being good.

Because God is good, the road to freedom remains open. Let's listen to Jesus. Stop putting your hands to the plow and looking back. Instead hold out your hand and keep looking forward until you see Jesus and, like Elisha, make this promise, "As the Lord lives and as long as you live, I will never leave you."