

Prophets: Calls and Limits

Katie Mitchell-Koch

Scripture: Psalms 71, 1-6; Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30

Before Jeremiah was born, he was called to be a prophet. When he was a boy, the word of the Lord said, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Would it be easier to have a direct call like that? Don’t we sometimes wish for personal directives from God? As a church, right now, we are looking for a call as we consider how to use our properties, time, and talents in a missional way, to serve the community.

But getting a direct call doesn’t necessarily mean the way is clear.... Jeremiah replied back to God, “Truly I do not know how to speak”. Is that humility? or fear? How would we react? ‘Hey... you’ve got the wrong person, God...’ Certainly prophets have a hard road. They are sticking their necks out in order to get the truth out. As Mike Poage said on Martin Luther King Sunday, ‘if the conditions are right, we pay our priests, but our prophets... we assassinate’. Reverend Poage also told us that Martin Luther King refused to stop his civil rights work, because he knew God was supporting the movement. That makes me jealous! What a gift to know with clarity when God is guiding you!!

Still, the call to prophesy is not an easy call, and perhaps that is why prophets merit a direct call from God. For strength, and clarity, and resolve... and just to make sure that they get it right. Our Psalm today starts with “In you, O Lord, I take refuge”, and it continues in verse 7, “I have been like a portent to many, but you are my strong refuge” (Psalm 71, verse 7). These are surely the words of a prophet. We can all take refuge in God, even when we are not sure we are hearing God’s call. For many of us, it is hard to be adrift on this earth, wishing to do God’s will, and not sure where God’s calling for us is. But navigating this life **with** a calling is not a cakewalk either. In today’s gospel reading, Jesus has to escape the crowd to avoid being hurled over a cliff!

Assuming that there is someone on the other end of the line, how do we go about receiving a call? I have been reading Corrie ten Boom’s book Tramp for the Lord, in which she describes her time after surviving a concentration camp. Ms. ten Boom traveled the world, telling people of her experiences and witnessing. Without a doubt, she feels direct guidance from God. Corrie ten Boom says that when she left the German concentration camp, she said she would, (quote) “go anywhere God sends me, but I hope never to Germany”. She reflects, “Now I understand that was a statement of disobedience.”, and follows with a quote, “F. B.

Meyer said, 'God does not fill with His Holy Spirit those who believe in the fullness of the Spirit, or those who desire Him, but those who obey Him.'" Ouch! Feel convicted now? I do!

In today's passage in Luke, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth and reads scripture in the synagogue on the Sabbath. You may remember from last week that the passage Jesus read is from Isaiah, and it says "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 of the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor". Then he tells the congregation, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing". Great! So where's the revolution? As some disillusioned Americans might say, 'how's the hopey changey thing going?'. It is Jesus himself who puts the brakes on our expectations as we go further into the reading. He says.. "the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah... yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." Why? Why are the actions of God through the prophets so selective?? Why can't we get more bang for our buck from the prophets? There are so many people suffering! If we feel frustrated, we are in good company. Luke says that "all in the synagogue were filled with rage". And *that* is the point when Jesus had to sneak out to avoid the cliff!

Jesus tell us this: Prophets have limits. And it is probably best that they do. After all, their power comes from God, and does not reside with them. Any human with too much power is trouble. The good news is that the prophets *know* they have limits. They know what their callings are. In an election year, when we-- at least me!-- have a tendency to pin our hopes on a certain person, we would do well to keep in mind that prophets have calls and limits. And good prophets know their calls and their limits.

I read an interview with Philip Yancey in the latest edition of *Plough*, a publication from the Anabaptist Bruderhof communities. In it, he said, "I study Jesus and Paul in vain if I'm looking for a way to 'change the world'. Surely they were aware of the great societal evils around them- think of Romans paying to watch gladiators murder each other for sport- but they gave us no global formula". Ahhh! This is not what I want from my prophets!!, (I thought as I read it). But Yancey continued, "Instead, [Jesus and Paul] called Christians to show the world a different way to live, to become pioneer settlers of the kingdom of God. Against all odds, that eventually prevailed in Rome. People saw that the Christians freed slaves (some of them), treated women with dignity, nursed plague victims rather than fleeing, and adopted abandoned

babies.... my hope rests in small groups of Christians around the world showing what God had in mind.” According to Yancey, Jesus and Paul knew the limits, or the scope, or their ministry and prophesying. It’s not to change the world through direct action, but to call people to participate in God’s plan-- to be “pioneer settlers of God’s kingdom”. Because that is what is going to change the world.

This theme of prophets having limits is echoed in the other lectionary reading for the week, in Paul’s words. In the 13th chapter of his first letter to Corinthians, Paul gives us reassurance that the world is unfolding within God’s plan. --And the passage is just so beautiful that I couldn’t resist including it today!

1 Corinthians 13, 1-10:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.”

Here, Paul tells us that the actions of the prophets here on earth are only partial... in partial fulfillment of God’s plan, and that only in God, and with God, will we have completeness. That is a morsel that we can hold in our hearts. So let us listen for God’s calling-- perhaps put aside our own agenda so that we can obey God’s call, and all the while know that [1 Corinthians 13, 12-13] “For now... we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” For now, and always, may we abide in Love. Living a life rooted in Love.... that is surely our calling. Amen.