

Prophets and Losses

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Micah 3:5-12

November 1, 2020 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church | All Saints' Day

“This is what the Lord says: ‘As for the prophets who lead my people astray, if one feeds them, they proclaim ‘peace’; If one does not, they prepare to wage war. Therefore night will come over you, without visions, and darkness, without divination. The sun will set for the prophets, and the day will go dark for them. The seers will be ashamed and the diviners disgraced. They will all cover their faces because there is no answer from God. But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgressions, to Israel his sin.”

A professor friend once asked me to make a theological presentation on the prophets of Israel at the beginning of a new graduate seminar he was teaching. I’m afraid I shocked the students with the way I began the seminar. I asked them: “Would you consider it a positive thing if members of your congregation said to you, ‘When you preach you always speak from your heart?’”

You can imagine the response. It was immediate. “Oh yes. That would be the ultimate compliment. Oh yes. What a great honor it would be if my people said that they knew I always speak from my heart.”

I told them that I think most of us would consider this a compliment. But there’s a problem. According to the Bible, this is the primary way you know a false prophet, if he speaks from his heart.

Why is this? Because the Bible teaches us that the only source of a prophet’s message is the Word of the Lord. And the Word of the Lord frequently speaks contrary to the heart of both prophets and their hearers.

These days there are lots of self-appointed prophets around. I will confess to you that, as a pastor, I distrust the whole enterprise of prophecy. I have found it a strange coincidence that almost every so-called prophet I’ve ever heard assail and abuse a congregation from a pulpit seemed to believe that their thinking and the Word of God coincided perfectly. That makes me suspicious from the start.

It also seems to me that most self-proclaimed prophets have a habit of speaking up most vehemently for something that ultimately is in their own interest, or something that reinforces their view of the world, their assumptions, their preferences and (dare I say) their prejudices.

I suspect that if God's ways really are higher than the ways of the most judicious and wise folks on earth, then God's thoughts are more likely to be incomprehensible, counterintuitive at a minimum, shocking, even scandalous to most of us. I just don't see God as a reliable standard-bearer for any political party, for any social class, or for any culture or any nation under the sun.

God, it seems to me, is an equal opportunity offender as often as God is an equal opportunity blessing.

The strangest thing about today's text from Micah is this: it is a message of warning to prophets. Let's just see if it has anything to say to the rest of us.

My old friend Bert Dominy, a retired professor from Baylor University, once told a group of future preachers. "If you tell people just what they want to hear, you can bet they will reward you. At Christmas, they might just give you a new saddle for your donkey." We've all heard some version of Bert's lesson.

But, today's text today goes a step further than Bert's warning. It is about prophets who fleece their own flocks. Micah warns their hearers, "If you feed them well, they will say proclaim, "peace" to you. If you don't, they will declare holy war on you."

Prophets might seem like a logical thing for a religion, maybe even indispensable, considering the history of our faith, but oddly enough the word "prophet" doesn't appear in the Bible till around the era of kings. God seems to have raised up prophets (Hb. *nabiim*) to serve as the king's advisor reliably to speak the Word of the Lord in the king's ear.

Prophets, of course, soon came to be a kind of countervailing force over-against kings and their royal courts. In contrast to the sycophants and self-serving officials of the court who would flatter kings and lie to them, and lie for them, the prophets were bound by their calling to speak the Word of the Lord. And, remember, the Word of the Lord isn't something written down, the Word of the Lord (in this context) is God himself in his self-expression, the living speech of the Lord.

That's where our text today comes in. If prophets can be bought for a price, you cannot count on their speaking truly the Word of God.

Some kings and some people may like it like that. And there are lots of texts in the Bible that warn us not to chase after prophets that speak comforting words when the discomfiting truth is what we need. And there are texts that warn us against heaping unto ourselves teachers who scratch our itching ears, telling us what we want to hear. But this text is addressed to the prophets themselves.

Prophets who can be bought, says Micah, will be rendered silent. God will shut the heavens against them, and seal their lips.

I'm going to confess another aspect of my skepticism about prophets. I find it suspicious when preachers stand in the pulpit and claim to speak a prophetic word on behalf of God. That just feels fishy to me. If the Word of God has something to say to a people of God, that Word will be addressed to everyone, including the preacher.

Maybe the best symbol for what it means for the prophetic Word of God to address us, would be an empty pulpit. Like this: AT WHICH POINT I STEP OUT OF THE PULPIT AND STAND ON THE SAME LEVEL AS THE PEWS.

So here's the point. We are all of us under the Word of God. In all of life, we are all under the Word of God.

I don't get to stand beside the Word of God, as though it is my word. The Word of God doesn't come from my heart. The Word of God echoes down through the centuries as empires rise and empires fall, as kings ascend their thrones and die in their beds, as tyrants rage for a season only to be forgotten by history. The Word of God echoes through the overturned tables of money changers in the Temple of Jerusalem as surely as the Word of God thundered from atop Mount Sinai. And wherever the Word of God speaks, the Word reminds us who God is and what God stands for: Love, Justice, Truth, Humility, Servanthood, Mercy.

And from down here, we as a people of God, make a truest response to the Word of God when we pray, whether we pray with our lips or our lives.

Today, the prayer which, as your pastor, I offer on our behalf, has been around more than half a century. I drew it from ethicist and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. I am borrowing his prayer today, especially today, with gratitude, because, frankly my friends, I dare not trust myself to speak today, for fear that my words will only be the words of my heart. I entrust us into the hands of God in this hour. I pray that each of us will be moved by the Word of God through the Spirit of Christ.

Let us pray:

"We pray to you this day mindful of the sorry confusion of our world. Look with mercy upon this generation of your children so steeped in misery of their own contriving, so far strayed from your ways and so blinded by passions. We pray for the victims of tyranny, that they may resist oppression with courage and may preserve their integrity by a hope which defies the terror of the moment. We pray for wicked and cruel men, whose arrogance reveals to us what the sin of our own hearts is like when it has conceived and brought forth its final fruit. O God, who resists the proud and gives grace to the humble, bring down the mighty from their seats.

We pray for ourselves who live in peace and quietness, that we may not regard our good fortune as proof of our virtue, or rest content to have our ease at the price of other people's sorrow and tribulation.

We pray for all who have some vision of your will, despite the confusions and betrayals of human sin, that they may humbly and resolutely plan for and fashion the foundations of a just peace ..., even while they seek to preserve what is fair and just among us against the threat of malignant power. Grant us grace to see what we can do, but also to know what are the limits of our powers, so that courage may feed on trust in you, who are able to rule and overrule the angry passions of men and make the wrath of men to praise you." AMEN.

"The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses," Robert McAfee Brown, editor (Yale University Press, 1986), p. 74).