

The Eyes of the People · Isaiah 40:1-11, 25-31; Matthew 3:1-12
Sheth LaRue · January 22, 2023
First Presbyterian Church of Benton Harbor

We've all seen the old trope of the doomsday prophet: an older gentleman, sometimes with a scraggly, white beard that hasn't seen soap and water in a while. He stands on a street corner, sandwich board sign hanging from his shoulders as he hands out flyers boldly proclaiming the coming days of doom, his apocalyptic voice reaching far above the din of traffic. This prophet has studied and discerned the end of things and he has settled on some supposed-divinely-inspired date which he achieved through complicated mathematics and earnest prayer. And now this prophet, unselfishly, has chosen to expose himself to ridicule and scorn as he cries out for any ear which will listen: "The end is nigh!"

Some of you may remember the spate of doomsday prophets from the 1990's and early 2000's, those men who declared the end of days and the need for humanity to repent and come clean before God's second coming. Harold Camping, a now-deceased televangelist who proclaimed that all of life would come to a crashing halt on May 21, 2011, had convinced a great number of people that his prophecies were true and indeed, the end was nigh. One of his followers, Robert Fitzpatrick, joined in the prophesying and spent his life's savings – nearly \$140,000 – on advertisements in New York City warning people of the impending doom.¹ As we all know, Camping's prophecy didn't come true, though his ministry thrived financially. And Robert Fitzpatrick – the advertiser – has retired, though not as comfortably as he might have.

These examples are but caricatures of who prophets are and what they really do, and it's my hope this morning that we can gain a better understanding of this mysterious vocation. I want to talk about prophets and their prophecies because their words can be so very important and relevant to us today if our ears are tuned to their voices. Friends: the voices of the prophets are the eyes of the people; when they speak we can see our world more clearly. When the prophets speak, we can see our world more clearly.

[pray and read Matthew 3:1-12]

¹ Heather Haddon, "Doomsayer confused as world doesn't end" New York Post, May 22, 2011. Accessed January 21, 2023. <https://nypost.com/2011/05/22/doomsayer-confused-as-world-doesnt-end/>

Former Memphis Theological Seminary professor Donald McKim gives us a foundation with which to work from: a prophet is “one who speaks on behalf of God to God’s people”² to “communicate God’s will for a situation.”³ These are men and women who have been called by God to speak whatever God wants them to say, and if I’m honest with you all, the things prophets say are, in the short-term, rarely good for anyone. Doom and gloom is par for the course as a prophet and no one wants *that* wet blanket hanging around, and so prophets are loathed, they’re disregarded and discarded, sent to live with the other undesirables out there.

Out there on the margins is where the prophets are relegated, and it’s there that they prophecy the word of God. Sometimes the words of these prophets fall on ears that don’t want to hear, or the words of these prophets upset the status-quo, or the words of these prophets shake the foundations of systems and institutions that would prefer to be left untouched. No matter how sweetly one speaks a prophecy, it’s still going to be difficult for the hearers to swallow.

And when a prophet speaks these difficult words, she faces a mountain of challenges: the prophet is called to speak even if people won’t listen. The prophet is called to walk lonely paths on the margins of society where most of us would rather avoid. The prophet is called to speak to a topsy-turvy world that doesn’t know it’s topsy-turvy and doesn’t want to believe it’s topsy-turvy. The calling of a prophet is anything but good and pleasant: “Here I am, Lord,” we sing, “I have heard you calling in the night”⁴ and I sure hope that it’s to be anything but a prophet!

This morning we read about John the baptizer, who was sent from God⁵ to testify to the light that was coming into the world⁶ - he was sent to announce a new king and a new kingdom, both found in Jesus Christ. John wasn’t the light, but he was to point to the light. In the wilderness of Judea, along the river Jordan, John points with his words as he boldly proclaims: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”⁷ He preaches a dangerous word, declaring that the current paths to God are crooked and they are lined with corrupt leaders and dishonorable systems. John calls these leaders a “brood of vipers”⁸ – they were the offspring of those who had

² *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, ed. Donald K. McKim, Second edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), s.v. “prophet”

³ *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, ed. Donald K. McKim, Second edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), s.v. “prophecy”

⁴ “I, the Lord of Sea and Sky (Here I Am, Lord)” *Glory to God* (Nashville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 69.

⁵ John 1:6

⁶ John 1:8-9

⁷ Matthew 3:2, New Revised Standard Version.

⁸ Matthew 3:7

long ago poisoned the people with unjust, unethical, unfair rules and expectations and now those leaders continue with that very same poison.

John prophesies that anything that does not bear good fruit – like these people and systems – *these* things will be cut down, cut off, and discarded as rubbish.⁹ John is serious about this word and this work, and he's more than honest with what he declares. John is ready to call into account anyone and anything that stands between God and God's beloved people, and he is ready to work alongside those systems and those people as they return to their upright ways. I want to repeat that for you: John is ready to call into account anyone and anything that stands between God and God's beloved people, and he is ready to work alongside those systems and those people as they return to their upright ways. Phew! Here...I am...Lord... Anyone want to be a prophet?

You and I are invited into this same work of naming injustice, naming belovedness, and working to restoration. God asks us all to bear witness to the inequalities and prejudices, to declare unholy and unrighteous systems and institutions that do wrong. God asks us to find our neighbors who are caught up in that sinfulness and invites us to see their belovedness. And God asks us to get our hands dirty as we work to restore the unrighteous to their upright ways.

But if you and I step back and look at ourselves in the mirror, are we ready to declare those words and do that work? Are we ready to be prophets? Are we ready to be prophets like Darnella Frazier, the young woman who filmed the murder of George Floyd? This prophet's actions called into account corrupt police officers and dishonest policing; this prophet's actions reaffirmed that George Floyd is God's beloved; this prophet's actions nudged this nation towards justice and reconciliation.

Are we ready to be prophets like Cesar Chavez, the Mexican-American labor leader and civil rights activist who committed his life to improve the working and living conditions of migrant farm workers? This prophet's actions called into account unjust farm owners and their inhumane practices; this prophet's actions reaffirmed the belovedness of migrant workers; this prophet's actions raised wages and improved working conditions.

Are we ready to be prophets like archbishop Oscar Romero who spoke out against social injustice and violence in El Salvador? This prophet's actions called into account the government and its leaders for the widespread corruption; this prophet's actions reaffirmed the belovedness

⁹ Matthew 3:10

of the poor; this prophet's actions shed light on the poor and powerless and gave them strength. And this prophet's actions led to his assassination in 1980.

Are we ready to be prophets like Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney, civil rights workers in the 1960's who encouraged black Mississippians to register to vote? These prophets' actions called into account the lack of voting rights and civil rights of their country; these prophets' actions reaffirmed the belovedness of racial equality; these prophets' actions empowered their neighbors to claim their civil rights. And these prophets' actions led to their murders by the KKK in 1964.

As if being a prophet - with the rejection and the ridicule - isn't enough, there's also the risk of losing one's life. People and institutions dislike prophets, and some dislike them enough to make them go away. Prophets like Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy were jailed for their work. Prophets like Fannie Lou Hamer and Rosa Parks were harassed and abused for their work. Prophets like Jimmy Carter and Greta Thunberg face ridicule and tarnished legacies because they say what humanity doesn't want to hear. Being a prophet will cost you your standing in society because you refuse to go with the flow, it will cost you financially as you manage your investments in an ethical manner. Being a prophet will injure your soul as you face abuse and harassment...and being a prophet could cost you your life. While it is true that prophets speak of a better world that is, indeed, possible, they also speak of the roads we must travel to get to that better world, and those roads are far from good, or easy, or pleasant. Prophets speak unwelcome truths that force us into discomfort – a place where no one wants to be – so we can become the people God intended us to be all along.

Friends, God is calling you and me to speak so we all can see our world more clearly. We are invited to join in expanding the way of Christ in our world, calling into account anyone and anything that stands between God and God's beloved people, and we are appointed to work alongside those systems and those people as they return to their upright ways. Is it costly? Without a doubt. Is it difficult? Without question. Is it worth it...is it worth my reputation, is it worth my life? I think so.

We are called into the wilderness to point to the light – the light which breaks through this world's darkness. Though we may grow faint and weary, the Lord is the everlasting God who gives power to the faint and strength to the powerless!¹⁰ We may grow weary, we may

¹⁰ Isaiah 40:28-29

stumble along the way, we may fall in exhaustion but the Lord shall renew our strength!¹¹ May we be the prophets we are called to be for the world which we are called to prophesy. May our words ring true, may our actions be fair and honest, and may we always declare the belovedness of God's creation. Amen.

¹¹ Isaiah 40:31