

Hometown Prophets

Ezekiel 2:1-3:3

Mark 6:1-13

“Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.’”

Ask a person on the street what a prophet does and likely that person will tell you that a prophet predicts the future. If indeed this *were* the prophet’s calling, you would be right in saying we are awash in prophecy. From those who tell the future by citing chapter and verse from Scripture concerning the end of the world to those predicting the same via global warming or world economic markets crashing or electoral politics imploding, prophecy has become a media event, each prophet’s facts and alternative facts vying for our belief.

The biblical prophets are neither prognosticators nor seers. Rather the main task of the prophet, according to Abraham Heschel, “is to bring the world into divine focus” by paying attention to the trivial. Instead of dealing with the so-called timeless issues that occupy philosophers, the prophet “is thrown into orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place. Instead of showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind,” Heschel says, “the prophets take us to the slums.” In fact, the prophet often raves “as if the whole world were a slum” because this is how the world appears when you are looking at it through the lens of God’s pathos. Pathos is not so much an attribute of God as it is God’s lack of neutrality about human history, God’s partiality to justice. God’s pathos rages in the prophet’s words even as “the prophet’s ear perceives the silent sigh” of human anguish. Therefore the prophet’s “true greatness is his ability to hold God and [mortals] in a single thought” until, in his words, “*the invisible God becomes audible.*”

Why, then, would prophets not be without honor, *except* in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house? Walter Brueggemann partly nails the reason in the beginning of his book on *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination* when he observes that, in contrast to the Old Testament prophets who were preachers without portfolio, preachers set in congregations who dare prophetic speech “must at the same time ‘speak truth’ while maintaining a budget, a membership, and a program in a context that is often not prepared for such truthfulness.” Mind you, I am not complaining, just ’splainin’ that the hometown crowd can be quick to take offense when one among them who is not exactly one *of* them presumes to speak for God and against the status quo. God knows that was so when I first blew into town. Someone even called Louisville to see how they could make me stop preaching about ordaining gay and lesbian Presbyterians. I share that only as something to remember when your next minister blows into town and, seeing events through the lens of God’s pathos, begins to shake these foundations.

But Brueggemann only partly nails the reason prophetic preaching is, in his words, “profoundly difficult and leaves the preacher in an ambiguous and exposed position.” What I would add is that as the church *becomes* the preacher’s hometown, as the context of preaching includes the illnesses and deaths, marriages and divorces, births and baptisms and brokenness that have bound a preacher and a people together in the bonds of love for, say, twenty-three years, the preacher begins to know precisely the relationships that are risked when the word from the Lord heard through the words of Scripture is clean contrary to the fiercely held beliefs of those given her to tend. It’s not about risking the budget but about risking the ties that bind us. Sometimes the word so convicts me that I can do nothing other than speak it. Other times, I do my best to translate the word I have heard into words that might be hearable rather than dismissed out of hand. Now and again, I simply opt for a pastoral word out of compassion or outright cowardice.

Frankly the great good thing that will happen when you call the next minister of this congregation is that she or he will look out on a sea of strangers for the first season of ministry and be unwittingly bold! Then over the years, precisely *because of* the next minister’s affection for you, perhaps his or her prophetic voice will not waver. Yet there is an elephant that will still be in the sanctuary once I am gone. The elephant is the effect that partisan loyalties have had on the church’s hearing of most every word spoken in the hour of worship beginning, I think, after 9/11 and reaching its zenith over the last ten years. Not judging our politics by the gospel but judging the gospel by our politics.

Which brings me to your part in this holy conversation between God and mortals mediated by the prophets and prompted by prophetic preaching. At issue in both texts is not so much the hesitation of the prophet or preacher to *speak* God's Word as it is the people's *hearing* of God's address.

Consider the exiles and their hometown prophet Ezekiel. Say this, God tells him: "Thus says the Lord." That, in and of itself, will be enough to get these scorpions riled. "Whether they *hear or refuse to hear* ," God tells Ezekiel, they shall know that "the Lord's word is still active in their midst...just because Ezekiel is there speaking for the Lord." [Robert Jenson] Hearing, in the first place, does not mean agreeing. I will never forget the Sunday when one of the loyal opposition in this congregation responded to a sermon on a text from Jeremiah I had chosen at the beginning of the Iraq war by saying to me, "If God ain't on our side, God ain't got a side." The words at least let me know God's word from the prophet Jeremiah had been heard!

Likewise in the synagogue in Nazareth, Mary's son, the carpenter, that hometown snot-nosed kid Jesus stands up to teach and immediately the objections begin to fly. Where did he get all of this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? In sum, who does he think he is, coming in here and acting as though his words were God's word? *And they took offense at him* . Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a little book of lectures to future preachers entitled *Life Together* , says listening is the first service a congregation owes to God and God's word. You owe it to God and your next minister to enter this sanctuary week after week in an attitude of expectant listening. "Listen for God's word," we say before we read the lessons. It is what preachers spent the week doing on your behalf, so that our merely human words might point you toward God's word which is Jesus Christ. Discipleship begins with the discipline of listening expectantly for God's address. Inattention is worse than taking offense. From the get-go, the congregation in Nazareth decided not to listen. The result was that Jesus "could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them." Moreover, Jesus was amazed at their unbelief, an unbelief that is the same thing as believing more in religion, more in Caesar, than you believe in God.

Finally on the heels of his own rejection, Jesus readies the disciples to be rejected too. He sends them out empty-handed, dependent on God and vulnerable to the strangers whose homes they will enter. Equipped only with a word from the Lord, they will say, one way or another, "Repent!" "Turn around!" "Change, for God's sake!" Because God's ways are not and never have been our ways, hearing the word involves a demand and a decision, but a demand and a decision in which we are always free to turn our backs on God. Therefore Jesus hastens to add, "If any place will not welcome you *and they refuse to hear you* , as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."

It is this last story that concerns the future of the church, concerns each of you as witnesses to the prophetic word in the world. Peter's sermon on Pentecost began with the words of the prophet Joel: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon *all* flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams." In these latter days, the church is to be a single prophetic community in the world whose task is "to *interpret...* each reality (each trivial detail) as an occasion of that hope which is there if Jesus lives; to treat, in words and speaking deeds, each hope and fear as a hope for love's triumph." To put a prophetic point on the church's commission, Robert Jenson adds, "Whenever the church looks big enough and potentially influential enough to make it worth the trouble, the state and the current ideology will try to co-opt the church as a religious auxiliary—and probably succeed. Then this recognized church will, like other religious societies, be a conservative force." Nevertheless, "Where the words are read [and the gospel is proclaimed], there is always the chance someone may hear them."

In 1884, Denis Wortman, a pastor in the Reformed Church in America, wrote the hymn we are about to sing. Reflecting on the hymn's text, Walter Brueggemann wrote, "There is a tacit yearning in the church for the prophetic. And so the church sings about the prophetic with some vigor...all the while, in practice, mostly resisting anything prophetic and really wanting no more than a status quo pastorate.... Those who would be prophetic are situated exactly in that ecclesial ambiguity, an ambiguity very often felt among [preachers] quite personally as we at the same time intend to take the call seriously and yet cringe from it when we get down to it. But the singing? The singing does not stop!" Thanks be to God.