

JULY 5, 2009
PENTECOST 5
“PROPHETS OR PROFITS?”

Let us pray: O Holy Spirit of God, give us ears to hear and heed your prophetic Word, a word that afflicts us when we're comfortable and comforts us when afflicted. May we with Paul, know the truth of how your power is made known in our weakness. In Jesus' name, the Word-bearer made flesh, we pray. Amen.

July is the month of prophets as we hear today in our Hebrew scripture reading from Ezekiel, next week from Amos, the week following from Jeremiah and the week after that from Elisha. It's a good opportunity for us to reflect on the role of the prophet not only in ancient Israel but to consider Jesus as prophet and whether God still sends us prophets in our day.

Our brief reading from Ezekiel's a good place to start since it tells the story of

Ezekiel's own call from God and hints at the difficulties Ezekiel will face in his prophetic calling. The story's simply told. Ezekiel, who we think was a priest of the Jerusalem temple in the 590's and 580's B.C.E, during the last days of the temple before destruction by the Babylonians and the consequent exile in Babylon of which we heard last week in our reading from Lamentations, one day saw a vision that caused him to fall on his face even as he heard "the voice of someone speaking."

The Voice said, "*O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you.*" And, as Ezekiel remembered it, "*when the Voice spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard the Voice speaking to me: 'Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendents are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to*

them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.”

End of today’s reading, but not, of course, the end of the Book of Ezekiel, which runs to 48 long chapters. But already in the priest Ezekiel’s call to be God’s prophet we can see the outlines of the prophetic calling, of what a prophet is called to do.

First, of course, is that the prophet is one who “hears a voice” and learns to identify that voice as God’s voice. Here, it’s well to remember the story of the boy Samuel that we heard way back in January during the Epiphany season in which Samuel is awakened three times by a voice disturbing his sleep, which only with the help of the priest Eli, is he led to understand is God’s voice so that as God calls yet a fourth time, the boy Samuel arises and says, “*Speak, for*

you servant is listening” — and thus begins Samuel’s vocation as a prophet, a vocation that begins with simply “listening for God’s voice.” So too with Ezekiel and all the prophets.

But secondly, the Voice says “*I am sending you to the people of Israel*” — and the Voice goes out of its way to describe Israel more than a bit redundantly as “*a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me*” adding “*they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day*” and as if that weren’t clear enough, “*the descendants are impudent and stubborn*” all of which I suppose is intended to give Ezekiel fair warning that this matter of being sent to the people of Israel on God’s behalf will be no easy job. The prophet can expect resistance and rejection just like God godself, for the people are rebels and transgressors, an impudent and stubborn and self-righteous lot.

Thirdly, the Voice begins to fill Ezekiel in on what the purpose of the prophet being **called** by God and sent to God's rebellious people is for: *“I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’”* Nothing yet, notice, of just what exactly Ezekiel is to say to God's rebellious people—that'll become clear enough in succeeding weeks, and it'll become clear that there is a consistent content to the prophet's message on behalf of God, but it'll also become clear that God always sends the divine Word-bearer into the thick of the everyday political, economic and religious life of the people, often with a message to its very leaders and the very specific events and circumstances of their life together. In other words, we'll see that the message of the prophets isn't some timeless, philosophical truth, but is a Word of God that dares to address the messiness of everyday life with a no-nonsense “Thus says

the Lord”.... (dot, dot, dot—fill in the blanks).

The most important point here is that the prophet isn't just giving his point of view, his opinion, his well-considered judgment. As we'll see when we come to Jeremiah, for example, the prophet often finds himself proclaiming a word that he'd rather not have to proclaim and would do almost anything not to have to declare. Jeremiah experienced the Word of God as a “burning in his bones” that he tried to hold in but simply couldn't. And so the prophet's Word was simply God's Word and the prophet was to be seen as simply God's “mouth piece,” God's Word-bearer.

Finally, the story of Ezekiel's call to be a prophet ends on this quizzical note:

“Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house, after all), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.” This may strike us as a curious message on which to conclude on

the part of the Divine Voice, not particularly effective in motivating confidence on the part of the prophet, we might well think. But on the contrary, I think we'll find, it's both the most realistic and honest advice the Divine Voice could give, knowing that measured by the response they received from the rebellious people of God to the message of God they bore, the prophets were **dismal failures**—often telling the people precisely what they didn't want to hear, challenging the conventional way of thinking and the social and economic status quo and daring to utter the religious blasphemy that God wasn't, after all, on their side in all circumstances, however much God had claimed them as God's own special people.

The prophets, if the truth be told, weren't a particularly successful lot in getting the people to listen and change their ways. And yet, the Divine Voice promised Ezekiel, "*whether they hear or refuse to*

hear...they shall know that there has been a prophet among them” which means that the bottom line is **not how successful** you are Ezekiel, in getting the people to heed your message but **how faithful** you are to me in delivering it. And indeed, isn't it remarkable how Israel in exile did indeed remember and in time revere the words of the prophets—these very same Word-bearers of God who had so unrelentingly tried to get the rebellious people to listen—are all remembered as heroes of Israel's history and their prophetic words canonized in Scripture: from Amos and Hosea, to Jeremiah and Isaiah, Ezekiel to Micah and so on.

Today's Gospel reading of Jesus' return to his hometown synagogue and of his homies' rejection of his message from God is a clear invitation for us to see Jesus himself in the context of the prophets of his people who had preceded him—and next week we'll have opportunity to look at this

connection even more deeply in the disturbing story we'll hear of the beheading of John the Baptizer, the last and greatest of the prophets to precede Jesus, preparing the way for Jesus himself who seems in today's reading to be claiming the mantle of prophet as his own.

St. Luke's version of this story of Jesus' inaugural sermon in his hometown congregation is perhaps better known than Mark's abbreviated version which I earlier read for you, but the story is essentially the same. At first his home town crowd, which we can expect included his own family, Mark says were "astounded" at his teaching, asking "*Where did this guy get all this? What's this wisdom that's been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! For isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and his sisters sitting here with us?*" And they "*took offense at him,*" the text says, which in

Greek is even stronger, “they were **scandalized** by him.” You see, they thought they knew Jesus all too well, they thought they knew his origins and his family and his background, and he was acting above his station, scandalously.

And so, Jesus, in good prophetic style only served to pour oil on the flames of their resentment as he invoked the old adage: *“Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, among their own kin, and in their own house.”* It was a saying not designed to endear him either to his friends or family—a passage with which our “family values” friends on the Christian right have a hard time. In Luke’s telling of the story the hometown crowd is so enraged at Jesus’ jibe that they nearly succeed in throwing him off a cliff, but Mark is content to tell us that the effect of their resentment was so deep that Jesus couldn’t accomplish his usual acts of miraculous power there except for a few healings, and that he left

town, in a telling statement, “*amazed at their unbelief.*”

The episode ends with Jesus leaving town, shaking the dust from his sandals in this, his first unsuccessful foray into hometown territory, not defeated but simply amazed at the unbelief of his hometown folks who rejected him as God’s Word-bearer--just like the prophets of old. They wouldn’t kill him this time but eventually they would—thinking they had pushed this latest of the prophets and his unpopular message out of the world onto a cross. But unlike the prophets before him, Jesus was not only the bearer of God’s Word, but, as the Church came to confess, was the very Word of God incarnate which God raised from the dead on the third day.

This, sisters and brothers, is the prophetic Word of God that you and I are called to bear, like Ezekiel before us, into the thick of our everyday lives. Therefore with Paul of our epistle reading we’re

content to take up our prophetic mantle with God's assurance that "*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.*" Despite our own disabilities and shortcomings we too can take up the prophetic task of bearing God's Word of good news into our world "content" as Paul says with our own "*weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*"

On this Fourth of July weekend, it's good for us to remember that prophets always speak into the messy politics of their people's lives. And so today I want to close by reminding you of perhaps the most prophetic words ever spoken into the midst of our American political life by a President of the United States—different as it is from one of our recent leaders who claimed to have had a sure if private sense of God's being on his side.

Not long ago Ruth and I attended a lecture at UCLA by Ron White, a retired professor of church history, whose most recent book entitled simply A. Lincoln has been widely praised. But some years ago Prof. White devoted a whole book to just one speech of Lincoln's which he considers the most important address in American history and also the most profound from a Christian point of view.

Lincoln, as you may know, wasn't really much of a conventional church goer and never, so far as we know, really joined a particular church. But he knew his Bible and had a strong, if unorthodox, view of God's providence—the way in which God rules the world of everyday events. And in these most famous words of Lincoln's, spoken in his Second inaugural address, just weeks before he was assassinated in Ford's Theatre, he gave voice to this prophetic understanding of God's role in the Civil War

over which he had presided—the, of course, most divisive conflict in American history.

Let me close with a few of Lincoln's prophetic words that sought to reach beyond the immediate bloody conflict, pointing the way to a reconciliation that would be long in coming. Speaking of people of both North and South, the Union and the Confederacy, Lincoln wrote: *“Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his purposes.....”*

Concluding, our sixteenth president said prophetically: *“Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this scourge of war might speedily pass away. Yet if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled up by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid with another drawn with*

the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”

With Ezekiel and all the prophets, Abe Lincoln knew how to lament—in this case using the words of the 19th Psalm—as he beheld what Julia Ward Howe would describe in her “Battle Hymn” as the Lord’s “trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.” May we also have the courage and faith to do so in our day.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.