

PROPHETIC VOICE

Sermon Presented to St. Paul's Church

2 Lent, Luke 13:31-35, Year C

March 13, 2022

Thack Dyson

I cannot conceive of a worse job than being an Old Testament prophet. They told the truth to an unreceptive audience that could not handle the truth. It wasn't just the message, it was also their presentation. The prophet Jeremiah showed a clay pot to a crowd of Judeans and told them that it represented the southern Kingdom of Judah. Then he smashed it to smithereens and told them that this was what God had in mind to do to them. He was right. In a dream, the prophet Ezekiel ate a copy of the Torah, thumb index and all, just to show how the word of God was as sweet as honey. Prophets could be a peculiar lot.

The problem with prophets was that they were fiercely faithful to God, or as Frederick Buechner said, "drunk on God and their intoxication made their listeners uncomfortable."¹ With a total lack of subtlety, they raged against hypocrisy and corruption wherever they found it. Typically they confronted kings, the unrighteous and the religious elite.

Suffice it to say, prophets were rejected by the people in power. Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern. According to tradition, the prophet Isaiah was sawn in half. No, prophets usually were not invited over to the house for dinner after they got through railing at folks. Maybe that accounts for the fact that most prophets did not want the job. Jeremiah pled that he was much too young for that type of work. Moses pointed out to God that he had never been much good at public speaking and that the chances were that Pharaoh was not going to give him so much as the time of day.

¹ Frederick Buechner, "Prophet" in *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's A, B, C* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), p. 90.

Nothing had changed much by the time Jesus arrived on the scene. Today's gospel lesson finds Jesus talking about prophets as he fends off a group of Pharisees. Twice, Jesus talks of prophets and how Jerusalem, the holy city itself, “kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.” (Luke 13:34b, NRSV). This provocative gospel passage begs the question: So, what do prophets preach that riles people?

Prophets are spokespersons, not fortune tellers. In our Christian tradition, prophets are understood to be people who speak and teach the Word of God. Although Jesus is so much more than a prophet, Jesus is connected to the prophetic tradition that continues today. Prophets challenge the prevailing authority structure. Prophets speak and teach about God's truth, about God's power, and that threatens the truth and power of the day. In Jesus' time, he threatened the religious authorities and their control of how the people were to understand God. Jesus questioned the integrity of those in power, challenging the power structure they worked so hard to create---a power structure that oppressed the poor and the powerless. This is why prophets were so fiercely rejected by those in authority.

That said, being a prophet sounds like a daunting role for only the toughest of folks---a calling that is filled by someone else, certainly not people like you and me. But what if being prophetic was simpler than you think? What if being a prophet was not something God left up to those who were the brashest with the loudest voices, but rather, what if God was calling each one of us to be prophetic in our own, unique way?

Dr. Robert Cialdini is Arizona State University Regents' Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Marketing and the best-selling author of *Pre-Suasion: A Revolutionary Way to Influence and Persuade*. About ten years ago when he was a teaching fellow at Stanford University he directed a research team to go door to door in a San Francisco suburb, placing

hangers on doorknobs with messages about energy conservation. For some homes, the signs urged the homeowners to save energy in order to protect the environment; another said they should conserve energy for the benefit of future generations; a third pointed to the cost savings that would result from conserving energy; and the last stated that most of the homeowner's neighbors were taking steps to save energy every day.

At the end of the month, Cialdini and his team returned to the homes that received the door hangers to read their meters and then compared them to homes that received no messages at all. They hoped to discover what kind of messaging effects people's behavior the most. After comparing the energy usage from the houses with door hangers, what they found is that only one of the four groups of houses that received those hangers actually reduced their energy consumption as compared to the houses who didn't receive a door hanger at all. The only door hanger that made a difference in people's behavior was the one that said, "your neighbors are doing it." The homeowners who received one of the other three messages, touting the benefits of energy conservation, did not change their lifestyle and kept on living as they had before. Cialdini summarized the most important conclusion in the study when he said, "People are looking at those around them, like them, in their particular environment, in their particular context, to decide what to do."

I love that a prestigious university spent a huge amount of time and resources in order to prove what any teenager can tell you---peer pressure is real. And peer pressure doesn't ever really stop. From the moment we become aware of ourselves in relationship with others, we begin to weigh who we are and how we fit in. We are constantly comparing ourselves with those around us---who is more successful, who is smartest, who is strongest, who is thinnest, and who is kindest. For some, that kind of comparison is almost completely subconscious. For others,

comparisons control every part of their life. Comparing ourselves, living with peer pressure, can be exhausting; but if comparison is a part of life, then perhaps God can use that very human condition for good.

Going back to the idea of prophets, prophets are people who teach others about God; but teaching happens everywhere, and most often in the classroom of everyday life. We know, either through research or common sense, that people---all people---are looking to those around them to decide what to do and how to live. A prophetic life does not have to be a complicated or complex one. A prophetic life, a prophetic witness, simply has to be grounded in the truth of Christ.

Today is the second Sunday in Lent. We are on a journey through this special season in which we often find ourselves trying to live differently, to mark these 40 days with a certain behavior that can change our lives for the better. As I mentioned in my Ash Wednesday sermon, Lent has historically been about, among other things, changing our lives in ways that honor our relationship with the Lord. But perhaps Lent can be an invitation to change our lives in meaningful ways that go beyond these 40 days.

Perhaps we can make a change, even create a habit in our own lives that uses the idea of peer pressure for our own good and the good of those around us. Perhaps we can claim our own ability to encourage others to recognize God in the world, in other words, to claim our own prophetic voice.

Small shifts in behavior, small tweaks in our habits, can create big ripples in our lifestyles. For most of us, prophetic living is not the strongest habit in their lives. Sure, going to church, being a part of a Christian community, sounds good, but taking that identity out into the world, being a prophet in the other spheres of our lives, is not a habit for us, but I think it could be.

Just imagine all the people in your life that have no connection with your faith and your faith community. Friends, coworkers, neighbors---there are so many people who connect with us on a regular basis that have nothing to do with our spiritual life. How many of those people live day-to-day, working hard, staying busy, just putting one foot in front of the other, but always hoping for something more? Honestly, how many of us live day-to-day, working hard, staying busy, but always hoping for more? God wants so much more for us, so much more than just the daily grind. God wants us to claim our purpose beyond ourselves, to show love in tangible, meaningful ways, and when our lives bear witness to the grace of God, we become prophets to those around us.

Let me be fair with you---a prophetic life is not an easy life. We live in a world where too often cynicism is celebrated and hopefulness is derided. The status quo raises up and rewards self-centeredness while compassion is seen as weak. Our broken world needs prophets, and God has sent you and me to make a change. We are being called to bear witness to the radical truth of Christ, a truth that is as prophetic, vital, threatening and hopeful today as it was 2,000 years ago.

You have a prophetic voice to share with the world. If you have the courage to influence your neighbors in positive, hopeful ways, you have a prophetic voice, and God is calling you to make your voice heard. No act of love is too small. No witness of hope is too small.

In a few moments, we will celebrate the baptisms of Harry Cooper Dismukes and Margaret Ann Quinn. As part of the baptismal service, I will offer the following charge: “Will you who witnessed these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?” your response is supposed to be a heartfelt, “We will!” By your affirmation, you are committing, with their parents, to be witnesses to them of the love of Christ. You will be their prophetic voices that will lead them in the faith. Never forget that.

I'll leave you with this saying that speaks volumes about the call to use our prophetic voice: "What we keep, we lose, and only what we give remains our own." We have been given unique gifts from God, gifts to share with the world. Do not let your gift go to waste. You do have a prophetic voice, and the world desperately needs to hear it.

AMEN