

Where are the prophets?

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Before we get into the question of “where are the prophets”, it might be helpful to first determine “what is a prophet”. I referred to several different Bible dictionaries and the consensus is that a prophet is someone who speaks on behalf of another, especially in the Greek understanding for one of the gods. In the Judeo/Christian tradition a prophet is someone who speaks on behalf of the one true God. Inspired by the Holy Spirit through direct declaration, as in the case of Moses, or through visions and dreams, as we read in the stories of Isaiah and Ezekiel. The prophets acted as moral and ethical agents calling the people to repentance, they anticipated what God would do in the covenant with His people, and they called the community back to the covenant which they had ignored and so suffered the consequences of violence and exile.

In the Judeo/Christian tradition prophecies spoken by these chosen people quite often alluded to the coming Messiah, even as early as the beginning chapters of Genesis. As we move forward in the Biblical canon, Jesus and his disciples take on the roles of prophets. After Jesus himself, the Great Prophet, the Apostle John is likely the first name that springs to mind as the writer of the Book of Revelation. With that bit of background information, let us return to our scripture verses.

Moses had been the primary leader of the Israelite people in their desert wanderings. He was also responsible for their release from Egypt after performing a number of miracles, as directed by God. Nearing the end of his life, the people were concerned about who would intercede for them as Moses had at Horeb, as we read in Deuteronomy 5:

⁴The LORD spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain. ⁵(At that time I stood between the LORD and you to declare to you the word of the LORD, because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain.)

At the close of Deuteronomy, recognition is given to Moses as a prophet:

¹⁰Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, ¹¹who did all those signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. ¹²For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel. Deuteronomy 34:10-12

Because God promised that a new prophet would arise, we know that God's revelation did not end in the desert. Future prophets would be called from the people themselves, people who knew the history of God's covenant with His

people. As such the people were to not only hear what the prophets had to say, they were also expected to act on what the prophets told them.

¹⁸I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. ¹⁹I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name.

Deuteronomy 18:18-19

Seems pretty straight forward doesn't it? The prophet speaks, the people act, and all is well. As we know things didn't always go that way. One of the first hurdles was getting someone to serve as a prophet. You see, the prophet was to speak the word of God in God's name, no one else's. To speak in his own voice would be to speak under the penalty of death. The prophet could not speak any word not given to him by God, again under penalty of death. The prophets we read about in the Bible were often beaten, or even killed, because the message they brought was unpopular. The message to "Turn back and repent" can certainly get some peoples hackles up! This helps to explain why those prophets we read about – Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others were reluctant to take on the mantle of prophet, it was certainly a risky business! Prophet was not a position that someone could just apply for, they had to be called to it.

In these modern times, you are not likely to hear of someone being called to the office of prophet. Does that mean we are not in need of God's word? Of course, not. Then who will serve as our mediator, our prophet? During the New Testament period there was an increase in false prophets which seemed to overwhelm the community to the point they could not discern who was truly speaking on God's behalf. In today's technologically connected world it can be extremely difficult to sort out who is speaking truth and who is not. That's not to say that we do not have modern day prophets. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, and Martin Luther King, Jr., are seen by many as prophets of the 20th century. These and others have been raised up by God to announce that we are in breach of the divine-human covenant, particularly regarding violence. Like the prophets before them, these people provided a vision of what God will do. Dr. King spoke these words of prophecy:

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama... little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a *dream* today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."

To that I say AMEN!

Back to our question of “Where are the prophets?” of this age. There are a lot of well-known megachurch pastors and televangelists, many of whom are doing good works here and around the world. Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago is quoted as saying, however, “There ain’t no prophet in the written record who is pastor of a megachurch.” Let’s face it, prophets usually aren’t that popular! So where are those prophets working outside of the glare of halogen lights and not concerned about worship attendance to prove their worth?

I read that some might call pastors prophets. Personally, I find that a bit intimidating! Yes, we are charged with bringing God’s Word to the congregation in a way that they can hear what God is saying to them, but to call a pastor a prophet you might find us following Jonah’s lead and hightailing it to distant lands. Don’t misunderstand. We as pastors seek to bring God’s Word inspired by the Holy Spirit, just as Moses, David, Isaiah, and others have done in the past. We are just very aware of the weight a prophet bears and may shy away from speaking words that often times need to be heard. We know that if we speak out strongly against those who choose war over peace, we will offend some in our congregations. On the other hand, a pastor who advocates a “just war” response to violence may alienate members of their audience, as well. Our desire for our congregations is to illuminate, not eliminate, the members.

We are more likely to look out into the congregation and see the everyday prophets sitting in the pews, those people who don't seek recognition, but are doing works for the betterment of the common good. They are working in prison ministries. They are preparing and serving meals to the homeless. They are volunteering to tutor both children and adults new to this country needing to learn a new language and way of life. They are writing to their local, state, and national representatives requesting that decisions be made based on what is good for all people, not just some. There is a pastor in the Atlantic Northeast District of the Church of the Brethren who advocates "praying with your butt." (I had to giggle when I first heard that) What he is proposing is that these modern day prophets situate themselves at the local diner or coffee shop and talk to strangers, to bring the Good News to people who need to hear it. To some of you who are regulars at the local diner or Starbucks, you may already be fulfilling this call. To those who volunteer their time at the food bank, local thrift shops, and other charitable organizations, you, too, are fulfilling a prophetic call. All of you following in Moses' prophetic lead through actions, not just words. Moses organized an entire community, established laws and judged disputes, he feed the people, and pastored them in their times of insecurity. Actions can be just as prophetic as words and your actions speak volumes.

Today's prophets may be reluctant to bring the words of judgment that previous prophets have brought. That's understandable given the history of responses to former prophets. I don't personally know too many people today who would choose the route of martyrdom, like Bonhoeffer and MLK. Should that hinder us from speaking up on behalf of God? My answer is no. Although we may not want to judge others, there's enough of that going on today anyway, we can still bring God's Word to a world that needs to hear His Truth.

Where are the prophets? They are among us today. We simply need to have ears to hear and eyes to see them. Lord, open our eyes and ears to Your work in the world today. AMEN

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