

Sermon Bytes: Reluctant Prophets

Jeremiah 1:4-10

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About 15 years ago a sociological study of active Lutherans, concluded that 90% of all Lutherans rarely or never spoke about their faith to anyone. Now these were active church goers active in that they attended church about three out of four times a month. Now while this may seem a devastating commentary on the Lutheran church. I believe the same holds true for our United Church, we too are reluctant prophets. In fact we don't even consider ourselves prophets

Our Old Testament story tells us about another reluctant prophet Jeremiah was just a teenager. He was a reluctant prophet. He too did not want to talk with other people about God. In another words, he was a good United Church member or Lutheran for that matter.

The Bible says that Jeremiah was a prophet to the nations, that statement cause confusion indeed it causes three fundamental conundrums

First, when examining the word, prophet, most people in the church conclude that they are not prophets. Most of you, when you hear the word, prophet, think of paid preachers. Ministers like this fellow, standing in front of you today, Prophet. In fact I am the paid prophet of the Lord for you. I am trained to talk about God and the Bible.

A preacher goes to the seminary in order to study to be a prophet. Or you might think a prophet as a religious "big shot" like Billy Graham or some other television personality.

But you're sure of this you, sitting in a church pew, are not prophets. But if you look at the Biblical record you would be wrong, consider Acts 2:21 where God says, "All of my people are prophets." Young and old, male and female all my people are my prophets."

On Pentecost morning, the message of Pentecost is clear: all Christian people are prophets, men and women, boys and girls, young and old.

The Prophet Joel speaking in the voice of God:

All my people will dream dreams and see visions

Men and Women, young and all

All will share the story of God"

We are all God's talkers. Not just the paid preachers. Not just the famous God talkers like Billy Graham.

A second confusion is this: we don't realize the word, prophet, refers to a specific part of the human body. to fingers? No. ...to wrists? No. ... To hands? No. to elbows? No.to

shoulders? No.To heads? No. The word, prophet, refers to the mouth. A prophet is God's mouthpiece. A prophet is God's talker.

This is not about hands that are willing to serve others in love or feet that are willing to walk the extra mile for someone else. While they are crucially important, The prophet, refers is God's mouthpiece.

Most of us want our hands and feet to do the talking; most of us want our example to do the talking. We want to remain silent and say nothing. But, in addition to our hands and feet, we also need a mouth that that tells of our faith in God. A third confusion happens when it was said that Jeremiah was a prophet to the nations.

When we hear the word, nations, that brings to mind foreign nations like China or Chad or Chili. "A prophet to the nations" means to go to other nations and tell them about Christ. But, the word for nations is "ethnos" and means different ones. It refers to any group who are different. In other words, you don't have to go to China, Chad or Chile to be a prophet. A prophet is a talker, a mouthpiece for God, and a prophet can stay right here at home and speak to others around you.

These three confusions get in our way immediately. Someone else is a prophet; not me. I, a Lutheran, want to be a prophet by simply being nice to someone with my hands and going the second mile for them with my feet, but never use my mouth to say anything about God. The net result is that I avoid being a prophet.

One of the things that we so often forget is that many prophets in the Old Testament were reluctant to speak about their faith in God. It seems as reluctant prophets we join good company.

First, we need to talk about Jeremiah, the prophet today's text. Jeremiah certainly was reluctant. He said, "I am only a teenager. I am too young. I am too new at the Faith. Like Jeremiah, so many are reluctant to talk about our faith because we are afraid of rejection, afraid of the opinion of others, and afraid of ridicule. You don't need to be a teenager to be afraid of rejection and ridicule

There was Isaiah. God said to Isaiah, "Isaiah, I want you to be my prophet; I want you to be my talker and tell of your faith in me." Isaiah replied, "O no, God. I can't be your talker. I am a person of unclean lips. You should hear how I talk. I am such a bad example. I am a lousy disciple. How could I talk to anyone else about you Lord, "I am such a bad example. How can I witness for God."

There was also Gideon. When God called Gideon responded, "Not me, Lord, 'I come from the weakest tribe.' I have a poor education. I really don't know enough about the Bible.

The last one I mention was one of the Old Testaments stars Moses. Moses, too, found excuses and he said, "I have a speech impediment. I stutter. I am not good at talking at all. Really what he was saying was I am embarrassed to talk. I am shy. Get someone else to talk about you, Lord." Yes, the Biblical Record is full of lots of reluctant prophets.

But God would not take “no” from them, God persuaded each one of them to become the spokesman for God.

So it is with us. We too are reluctant prophets, reluctant witnesses for God. We too are filled with inhibitions and excuses and reasons why we can't do the job. Like God did to Jeremiah, God touches our courage, touches our spirits, and touches our lips and miraculously, God uses people like us, like you and me. God always uses common and ordinary people.

All of these famous prophets and famous leaders were initially common and ordinary people God chooses you; touches your courage, touches your spirit, touches your mouth and puts words into your mouth and you, too, become a prophet, a mouthpiece, for the Lord. This is what happened to Jeremiah and this is what happens to you and me.

In order to understand the work of the prophet Jeremiah. We need to spend a little time setting the historical context the high point of his 40 year ministry occurred after the death of the reforming king, Josiah in 609 B.C.E., down to the exile in Babylon 20 years later in 587 B.C.E.

For some twenty years Jeremiah confronted the leadership of Judah, in the capital Jerusalem, challenging the grievous shortcomings of a system in decay, reminding them that there is another way

Most simply, the prophet announces that Judah's central problem is that those who are in power have in fact abrogated their duty, and are dragging the people further and further into a desperate liaison with the waning Kingdom of Egypt but in doing so have drawn them away from God

His language leaves nothing to doubt. They have forgotten God and must now pay the price. "What sort of evil did your ancestors find in me that they moved far from me, and went chasing the wind and thus became wind themselves" (Jer 2:5)? He reminds them that Judah's ancestors, those whom YHWH led out of Egypt and brought to the land of promise, had turned their allegiance elsewhere.

As a result of this search for "wind," they became "wind" themselves.

Translation is hard. While the translation of the Hebrew word, hebel, as “worthless,” is not wrong, it does not go far enough. The most famous use of this term in the Hebrew Bible is found in the first verse of the poetic book, written by Koheleth, known more commonly by its Greek/Latin name, Ecclesiastes. "Wind of wind, all is wind," proclaims the deeply cynical author whose search for faith has come up, quite literally, empty.

One reaches out to grab what is without substance and one's hands grab hold of – well nothing. Judah's rejection of YHWH has them reaching for hebel, says Jeremiah, and as a result they have become just like what they have reached for.

The passage reminds the leaders that Israel is God's chosen and when they turn their attention to security and militarism in this case an alliance with Egypt. Their very identity as a people begins to evaporate.

Unlike the nations who secure themselves through treaties and kings, Yahweh is Israel's protector and king. This argument reminds people of faith of all time that there is a difference between the peace of the World – the Mutually Assured Destruction of Militarism that passes as peace -to the peace of God, where the lion and the lamb literally coexist side by side.

So how did this fall from grace happen? The prophet says that Judah has forgotten God because they have forgotten to tell God's their story, which is after all God's story. The most basic theological affirmation that Israel could make is enshrined, most especially in the Ten Commandments' first sentence:

"I am YHWH your God,
who brought you up out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery" (found in Dt 5 and Ex 20).

When Judah stopped telling this central story, they had nothing to cling to and as a useless replacement sought other sources to shore them up in their distresses. The result of the loss of the story of Israel was disaster. YHWH's free and wonderful gift of the land of promise - made first to the patriarch Abram and the matriarch Sarai at the very beginning of the saga of Israel - Judah has defiled and gutted, making YHWH's greatest gift into to'ebah, waste land

The land of Israel itself has been made unclean by the monstrous practices of the people of Judah. YHWH's hopes for the people in the land have been dashed, their future and the future of the land itself made dark and dangerous. But why?

"The priests stopped asking, 'Where is YHWH?' 'Where is YHWH?'"

But what is the role of a priest in any age except to ask that crucial question?

The demands of YHWH for justice and righteousness have been drowned out by false prophets the success of the powerful, the comfort of the few at the expense of the many. The loss of the YHWH of justice and righteousness plagues the 21st century as much as it did Jeremiah's 6th century B.C.E.

So what are we to do? Simply, return to YHWH, pleads Jeremiah, not some false image of YHWH, but YHWH, fountain of living waters, to YHWH, guarantor of justice, defender of the righteous, scourge of the greedy, the lover of the whole creation.

What that means is to remember. To tell the stories of grace received. To remind one another that God is with us

Not the God who makes everything better. But rather God who invites us to be part of the struggle to build a kingdom where justice is as constant as waves on the ocean ever changing --- but ever present – ever inviting us to take up our part to offer help and to build towards a coming day when the Kingdom of love and justice reigns over all creation.