

Those Crazy Prophets

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First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — May 3, 2015

Joshua 24:1-2, 13-26 NIV

Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God. Joshua said to all the people, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says . . .

'I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.'

"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

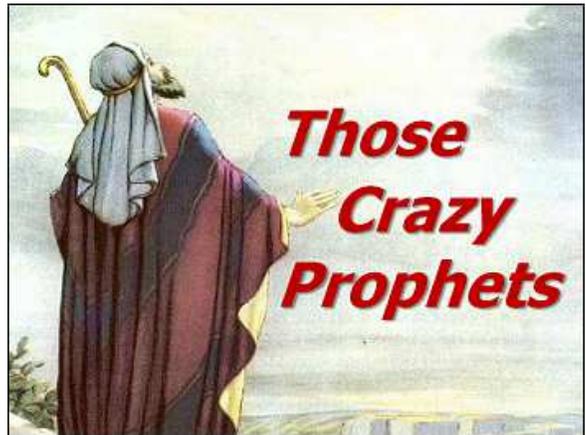
Then the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God."

Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you."

But the people said to Joshua, "No! We will serve the LORD." Then Joshua said, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD." "Yes, we are witnesses," they replied.

"Now then," said Joshua, "throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel." And the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the LORD our God and obey him."

On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he drew up for them decrees and laws. And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God.



Hosea 4:1-9 NIV

Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites, because the LORD has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying.

"But let no man bring a charge, let no man accuse another, for your people are like those who bring charges against a priest. You stumble day and night, and the prophets stumble with you. So I will destroy your mother — my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children.

The more the priests increased, the more they sinned against me; they exchanged their Glory for something disgraceful. They feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness. And it will be: Like people, like priests. I will punish both of them for their ways and repay them for their deeds."



The Hebrew Bible, which was the Bible of the earliest Christians, is divided into three sections called the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. In Hebrew these sections are called *torah*, *nevi'im*, and *ketuvim*. From the first letters of each of these three words Jewish people today use the acronym *Tanach* — T for *torah*, N for *nevi'im*, and K for *ketuvim*. (An acronym is a word made up of the initials that stand for an entity, like the acronym POTUS which stands for "President of the United States.") You probably never heard the Old Testament referred to as the *Tanach*, but that's what it's often called in the Hebrew-reading community. *Tanach* doesn't work for the English Bible, because the books of our Bible are in a different order.



These Sundays before Pentecost we're developing a series of teachings, one from each of the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible. Last week we looked at the Ten Commandments, a passage from the Law or Torah. In two weeks we'll look at a passage from the third division, the Writings. Today we'll consider two passages from the second division, the Prophets. The reading from Joshua is from the Former Prophets, and that from Hosea is from the Latter Prophets, specifically the "Book of the Twelve" Minor Prophets ("minor" only because their books are shorter than the Major Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel).



Who were the Hebrew prophets? Usually we think of a prophet as one who foretells future events. There's some of that in the Bible, but the concept of prophecy in Scripture is much broader. The word "prophet" in Hebrew is *navi*, which means one who speaks for God because God has spoken to him. In news reports of today, someone who speaks on behalf of someone else is called a *spokesman*. The President has a press secretary who acts as his spokesman. And that's what a prophet is: he is the Lord's spokesman, or "press secretary." When the prophet speaks, it is as if God himself has spoken, because God has spoken to him. There are both true and false prophets in the Bible, and in Deuteronomy there are rules about how to tell one from another; but a false prophet is somebody who makes an utterance claiming

to come from God when God hasn't really spoken to him.

So the prophets of the Bible speak out for God. But if you're going to be God's spokesman you need to have a platform from which to speak, and the platform on which the prophets speak is *the covenant God has made with his people*. The function of the prophet isn't just to predict future events; it's to proclaim the principles of the covenant, and call the people back to faithful obedience to them. That means the prophets take their stand on the basis of God's covenant Law. Sometimes, when the people haven't been loyal to the Lord and have ignored his Law, the prophets have to proclaim God's judgment. That's where they sometimes start predicting the future, because there are consequences for being disobedient. An important principle, throughout the Bible, is that *actions have consequences*, and the prophet is the one who warns the people about those consequences.

We can see this in both of the passages we selected today. It's evident in what Joshua says to the people of Israel, gathered at Shechem after they have occupied the land of Canaan. The Lord "is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you" (Joshua 24:19-20). To help the people remember what they need to do to avoid these consequences, Scripture tells us, "On

that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he drew up for them decrees and laws. And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God" (Joshua 24:25-26).

In the passage of Hosea we find a similar warning: "Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites, because the LORD has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed" (Hosea 4:1-2). What does this indictment remind you of — faithlessness toward God, cursing, lying, murder, theft, adultery? It's clear the Hosea has the Ten Commandments in mind, the foundation stone of God's covenant with his people. But the people have turned away from their bond with the Lord, and the consequences will follow: "Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying" (Hosea 4:3). The prophet sees what's happening when people live without regard for the ways of the Lord, and he issues a warning in the hope that people will return to God and be faithful to him once again.



Like Joshua, the prophet calls upon us to choose which authority we're going to respect. "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve!" Will we serve our own selfish interests, influenced by the values a corrupt culture presses upon us through media, the educational system, the economy, or the courts? Or will we serve the Creator, the Lord of life, who in his Law has blessed us with a way to live that brings fulfillment to us, and honor to him?

The prophets are the spokesmen for God, calling his people back to loyalty to his rule and his way of life. But why are they so intent on doing this? Sometimes, to get their message across, the prophets exhibit behavior we would call bizarre. Hosea married a prostitute, to demonstrate how God's people have been unfaithful to him.



He named his son *Lo' 'ammi*, "Not My People," so that whenever he called his son he would be proclaiming how the people had turned away from God's covenant. Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years to demonstrate the shame that would come upon his disobedient nation. Ezekiel lay on his left side for 390 days to illustrate the number of years Israel was to be punished for its unfaithfulness. He cut off his hair and beard, and burned part of it to show the destruction about to overtake Jerusalem because of the false worship being carried on there. These are just a few examples of the weird things the prophets do. Why do they do such crazy things? For one simple reason: the prophet is driven to extreme actions *because he feels what God feels*. He feels the agony of the Lord, his profound

sadness and sense of desolation, when his people turn away from his Law and covenant. Scholars call this the *pathos* of God, his own intense feeling when his people abandon him.

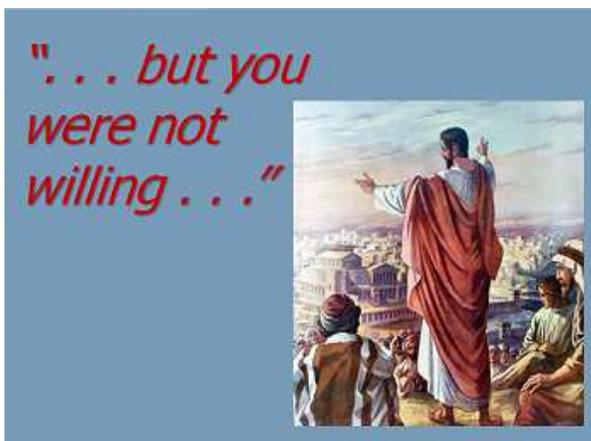
You and I may often wonder whether the Lord feels our pain. Does he understand our frustration, our sorrow, our disappointment when things go wrong in our life? But do we ever consider *how God feels* when we disappoint him? If there's anything the Bible teaches us about the Lord, it's that he has feelings of his own about his human family! The apostle Paul warns us not to "grieve the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 4:30). God can be hurt by our sinful actions and our indifference to his will. The prophets feel God's pain, and that's why they speak out for him with such passion and power, and sometimes perform bizarre actions to get people's attention.

There's another aspect of the writings of the Hebrew prophets that sometimes escapes our notice. *The prophets are poets.* They compose most of their prophecy in the form of poetry — not the kind of rhyming verse we associate with poetry in our language, but poetry with the meter and the parallel structure of lines that are characteristic of biblical poetry. (I won't go into the details.) The prophets are skilled artists with the Word of God, and along with their literary artistry they're also musicians who deliver their messages in song. That may seem strange to us, but in the ancient world there wasn't such a great difference between speech and song as we're used to. In fact, in Jewish worship to this day portions of the entire Hebrew Bible are chanted by a leader called the cantor, or singer.

So the prophets compose their prophecy in song, and the people know them as songwriters. Ezekiel even complains that the people of Judah only took him for an entertaining musician, and didn't take his message seriously. The Lord tells him, "You are to them like one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it" (Ezekiel 33:32). Is this a warning for us? So much of the Christian message today is presented in the form of *entertainment* in musical productions, TV programs, or movies. And even the sermon from the pulpit each week can be rated on the basis of how entertaining it is, or how dramatic, or how well delivered. There's no excuse for lack of artistry in presenting the Word of God — but, friends, bringing forth the message of the Scriptures is serious business in a world such as ours, steeped as it in confusion and darkness and corruption. Hosea proclaimed, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6), the knowledge of the Lord. He didn't say, "My people are destroyed for lack of entertainment."



So the prophets agonize over the indifference people display toward the Word of the Lord. They agonize over it because they love God's people, and they know that when people refuse to hear and obey the Word they will suffer the consequences in the judgment that follows. It's frustrating to the prophet to realize that sometimes he has been called to speak out for God precisely so that people *will* stop their ears to the Word and therefore suffer the consequences. Looking back over his work, the prophet Isaiah understands that he



was called for exactly that purpose. For the Lord told him, "Go and tell this people: 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (Isaiah 6:9-10). Jesus encountered that same indifference when he brought to his people the message of the kingdom of God. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he cried, "you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate" (Luke 13:34-35). Oh,

let us never be bored, or indifferent, or unmoved when the Word of God is truly proclaimed; let us not look upon the teaching of Scripture as mere entertainment, to fill a certain time slot during our Sunday gathering!

The prophets, then, are in sorrow because the people they're speaking to aren't taking the Word of God seriously. They're sensitive to God's pain and disappointment over human disobedience because they understand God's purpose for his people. From the very first, in his covenant with Abraham, the Lord revealed why he chose us to be his partners. Because the human race believed they could go their own way and abandon the ways of God, *all creation has been put out of joint.* The result when people violate the laws of God is that the world gets messed up.

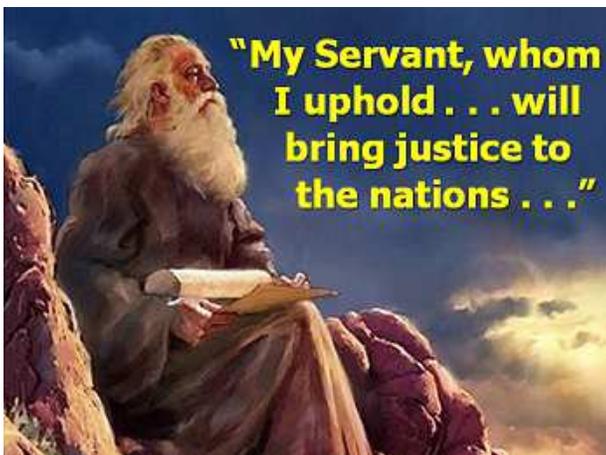
We see that in our passage from Hosea. Because God's people have violated his covenant commandments, "the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying" (Hosea 4:3). When people refuse to live as members of God's family, the whole universe goes askew. Therefore the apostle Paul can declare, "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:19-21). God is calling a new family to do something about this tangled world, and be a blessing to all peoples. The prophets are looking for the time when God's people will obey him and get his plan for the world back on track.



So the prophets do what we usually think of prophets doing: they see into the future, with a vision for what this world will look like when God's people finally return to him and partner with him to bring his blessing to all nations. The day is coming, the prophets declare, when God will renew his covenant and his people will know him once again. Jeremiah states it this way:

"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

This is the vision of the prophets for that time when God's people will be faithful once again and his purpose for history will be set back on course. Habakkuk puts it like this: "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14). And Isaiah's vision is this: "The glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (Isaiah 40:5). The prophets have been given insight into the mind of God, and they feel his heartache over the disobedience of his human family. But they also know the plan the Lord has to redeem his people, and they know it will come to fruition through the power and effectiveness of the Word of God.

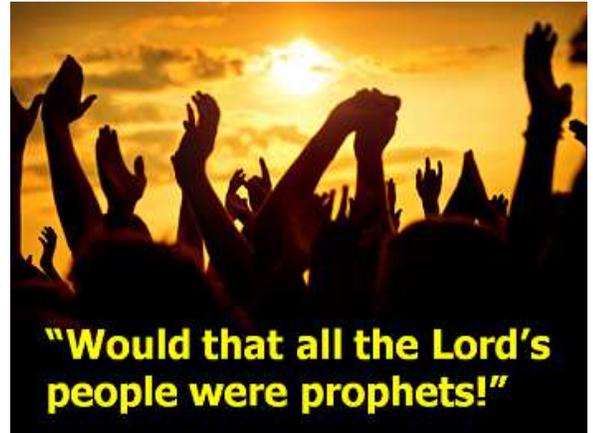


Exactly how God will bring his purpose to fulfillment is a truth the Hebrew prophets are reaching toward, but in their own times it was not entirely clear where the plan of God was headed. Isaiah begins to see it, and gives voice the vision God given him in several songs biblical scholars call the "Servant Songs." "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations." (Isaiah 42:1). "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed"

(Isaiah 53:4-5). For centuries after Isaiah wrote these words no prophet followed up on his vision. No one understood who the Servant would be, or saw what the Lord was driving at, in the Word he gave to his prophets.

But in the fullness of time God sent one man, one "faithful witness" who would be fully obedient to the purpose of God and, therefore, would embody all of Israel in himself. By raising that man from the dead, God made it clear that this man was his anointed one, his Messiah. This man would fulfill the calling of Abraham to be a light and a blessing to all nations, and inaugurate in his resurrection life God's new creation. In the coming of Jesus, the Lord revealed what the prophets of old had only begun to visualize. After his resurrection Jesus explained it to his disciples: "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44).

We've been speaking about the Hebrew prophets of our Old Testament. There are prophets in the New Testament as well. But because Messiah has now come, and his life fills the body of believers, their function is not quite the same as that of the Hebrew prophets. Prophecy is one of gifts of the Holy Spirit to the church, and as the apostle Paul explains, "everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort." (1 Corinthians 14:3). In the church the role of the prophets is not to proclaim the judgments of God, for "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Instead, a Christian prophet is one who builds up the body in the faith, and offers continual thanksgiving to the Lord. *Prophets in the church are active, enthusiastic worshipers.*



Chapter 11 of the Book of Numbers relates the account of two prophets called Eldad and Medad. Let me read the story:

[Moses] brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the Tent. Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took of the Spirit that was on him and put the Spirit on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not do so again. However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the Tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."

Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' aide since youth, spoke up and said, "Moses, my lord, stop them!" But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:24-29).

Are you and I worshipers today — sincere, active worshipers of the Lord? Are we filled with the Holy Spirit, and does it show when we gather to give praise and thanksgiving to the God who has redeemed us, and to encourage one another in the faith? If so, then you and I are prophets, too. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!"

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