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Proper 9 B

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The work of the Prophet is to be ‘rejected’ and enjoy it! Let me give you some quotes about ‘Prophets’ from Walter Breuggemann, a noteworthy Old Testament Scholar of the first order. It will help set the tone for what follows.

“The emergence of individual persons who speak with an authority beyond their own is indeed an odd, inexplicable, originary happening in Israel...”

“The prophets speak because they are compelled by an inexplicable force that is taken to be the summons of Yahweh.”

“These [prophets] are non-establishment figures who will not be silenced.”

“These originary individuals are odd and cannot be explained by any antecedent.”

“These uncredentialed, authoritative speakers do not utter universal truths, but speak concretely to a particular time, place, and circumstance.”

“Prophets are not primarily political agents in any direct sense and rarely urge specific policy.”

“The Prophets speak in outrageous and extreme figures because they intend to disrupt the ‘safe’ construals of reality, which are sponsored and advocated by dominant opinion makers.”

“Prophets are aware, acutely, of the distress, pain, and dysfunction that are present in the community that they understand to be freighted with coming disaster.”

“The Prophets found new and fresh ways and attention getting ways of imagining Israel into the fissure of death that it chose to deny and disregard...”

“They knew that Yahweh was in fact speaking through them.”

“One of the ways Yahweh returns to and remains at Israel’s center is by the utterance of these odd, abrasive, mostly unwelcome voices.”

Who are the prophets of today? Some have the gift as Paul tells us. Perhaps Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was that God gave him the message that must be told about the saving power of God through Jesus Christ. It is never definitively stated what the ‘thorn’ might be. But the work of the ‘prophet’ is always one that will ‘convict’ the hearer.

The prophet saw the truth and they were compelled to declare what they saw. They were not necessarily foretelling the future although history proves that they were remarkably accurate in their telling. But then as now, they were to ‘warn’, in even the most terrifying terms, a people grown deaf and blind to the truth.

The work of the prophet was then and is today to declare the indissoluble connection between the way in which we love God and the way in which we love our neighbor. It was a unique declaration of the Old Testament world and in Jesus day, of what became Christianity. Many world religions, though not all, have taught humanity to be merciful and charitable, but the Hebrew prophets are alone in declaring the uses of religion to be entirely null and void unless human beings

are treating their fellow humans with mercy and justice. To Ezekiel and other prophets it was never enough to simply drop a coin into the beggars' palm; you must ask yourself, "How far am I responsible for this one's being a beggar at all?" It is a question relevant for our day as well.

This marriage of the love of God and love of human beings was the backbone of Christ's teaching seven hundred years later. Today's message "*Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house*" was an ancient understanding of the prophetic vocation. But for Jesus, 'forgiveness' was at the heart of His message for/to us. We cannot be forgiven by God unless we forgive one another. Jesus message was not the end of prophecy but it was the fulfillment of all that Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others had said. The only picture Jesus ever painted of the last Judgment was in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 25 when he plainly states that the way we treat our fellow human beings is a replica of the way we will be treated by God. Prophecy brings us back to the basics every time. 700 years before Jesus day these bold men of the Old Testament, and probably more than a few women, were declaring the truth lived out by Jesus.

The picture painted of God is a pre-Christian one but we are left with an overwhelming conviction that God is God, right is right and wrong is wrong. That is an "iron tonic" to us modern day believers. In this world of 'relativism' we cannot dismiss this message if we are believers. We seem afraid to denounce evil

for fear of being called intolerant and we are not allowed to be morally indignant for “psychology says” that what is making us angry is an identical fault in ourselves! We are not allowed to have any definite values of right and wrong, for all things, we are told, are purely relative ... though relative to what is not made clear. It is not just the ‘victim’ of a heinous crime we are to be in sympathy with but the brutal and callous aggressor. We don’t share our faith for fear of interfering with the sanctity of another’s private beliefs; we are even fearful of living out the gospel lest we be labeled as “do-gooders.”

But 3000 years ago these giants of faith, the Prophets, are far less self-conscious. Always it is assumed that people have consciences and that they have the power to choose their path. If sweetness and light won’t do the trick then violent and terrifying threats and warnings must be used to crack the dreadful complacency.

Acceptability was never an issue. These were not out to placate the people in power or to conciliate the clever ones; their whole purpose was to “speak the word of the Lord.” Such voices of integrity sound to this day, despite issues of interpretation and text, like a trumpet down the centuries.

It just seems to me that human beings are forever trying to evade moral responsibility, while God is eternally trying to make them accept it, and thus grow up into being His children. Because of this human tendency the world of the Bible is bound to be an uncomfortable world. For here, God, not humanity, is master.

Here God speaks and human beings, if they are wise, will listen with a proper humility.

The prophetic message calls us always to a narrow path but a right path. Jesus does not back down from his ministry when people and things get disagreeable he seeks the strength of His heavenly Father to carry Him forward, to proclaim the Good News, that which the prophets had for ages been reciting to those who would hear. Listen for the voice which carries you away from your wants to God's needs. That is the prophetic message and it is alive and well today. Amen.