

Title: Prophets – The Thankless Call

Text: Deut. 18.15-19

Theme: God keeps his Word.

Series: Advent 2006 #1

Prop Stmt. Christmas is a celebration of a promise made and a promise kept.

Read Text:

The economic conditions in the country were disastrous when the son of Jeremy's uncle came to him and offered to sell his land to Jeremy. Jeremy lived in the city and his cousin's land was more out in the country. It would have had some value in years past, but Jeremy's country was being invaded by another nation, and his cousin's land had already been overrun by the enemy. There really was no point in buying the land. The country's government was being destroyed and all land ownership would be taken by the occupying forces. Nevertheless, in what appeared to be a ridiculous financial decision, Jeremy took some of what precious little money he had left and purchased the worthless piece of land from his cousin.

Luke was a respected leader whose public speeches generally attracted an influential audience. His moral integrity and commitment to his family was unquestioned. It was therefore, extremely odd, when, in the evening, after one of his public speeches, Luke's wife suddenly died and Luke, the very next morning, was right back to work as if nothing had happened.

Ian's daily routine often involved him working in and out of the highest government offices in the land. He knew the country's most powerful people on a first name basis and was often consulted regarding national decisions. And yet, this prominent man, one day took off his clothes and his shoes and for the next three years carried on his life in this rather shocking condition.

If you have not guessed it already, these three stories are taken right out of the pages of the Old Testament. These three men were prophets. Jeremy is actually Jeremiah. God told him that his cousin was going to try to sell that worthless piece of land to Jeremiah, and God told Jeremiah to go ahead and purchase it. He was to purchase it, not because the land would ever be of any value or use to Jeremiah in his lifetime, but because God wanted to send a message to the nation of Judah, through the life and actions and words of Jeremiah, that in spite of the invasion of the Babylonians, God was not through with this land. Though they were being punished for their rebellion, there was still a future hope for the people of God.

Luke was actually Ezekiel. God told Ezekiel that his wife was going to die, but when she dies Ezekiel was not permitted to publicly mourn for her because her death was a sermon illustration that God wanted to use to communicate to his people that when they received the news that the city of Jerusalem had fallen, that they were not permitted to publicly mourn either, because this was of the Lord.

Ian was Isaiah, the son of Amoz. Isaiah was presumably from a well-to-do family and Isaiah himself was well known. This man and his ministry outlasted and outlived kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. Jewish tradition holds that Hezekiah's son, Manasseh had Isaiah executed by having this old man of God sawn into two. Therefore, many people believe that Hebrews 11.37 has at least Isaiah if not others in view. It was Isaiah who for three years lived "stripped and barefoot" because God told him to do that as a sign of what was going to happen to the people in Egypt and Cush (the upper Nile region). The prophet Hosea was told by God to marry a prostitute, which he did. But she kept having children by other men, and then ran away from him. Eventually, her life hit rock bottom and she had to sell herself in a slave market. In obedience to God, Hosea went to the slave market and bought her so that his wife was now his slave whom he owned and even though morally she should never have left him, legally now, she could no longer run away. God told Hosea – Your life and marriage is a living illustration of my patient and enduring love for my people.

Think about that for a second. Do you think Jeremiah wanted to waste his money on that land that he would never see? Do you not think Ezekiel's heart was breaking when God told him "with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes."? And poor Mrs. Isaiah, and what the kids had to put up with in school, when dad is living without benefit of shoes and clothes! And then Hosea! The man's entire marriage was a train wreck because God wanted his marriage to be a sermon. Jeremiah, the weeping prophet also preached a message of hope. Ezekiel and Isaiah, the prophet's who both had visions of the holiness of God, and declared great messages of the future, also preached great messages of judgment. And if you want a taste of the love of God that drives our theology of redemption, then look at Hosea, and listen as the echo of his voice still reverberates in the alleys of the buildings, and see him holding out the highest bid raised in the air while he stands alone in the agora, the public market, surrounded by head-shaking, tongue-wagging, jaw-dropping acquaintances, as he unlocks the shackles of his wife and brings her back home where he has been raising her children, two of whom were sired by another man. The life of a prophet was not an easy life. So often they were misunderstood, ridiculed and in a number of cases, executed because they were faithful to God. Their actual lives became the message because God wanted His Word communicated in a way that no one could misunderstand what He was saying. But these guys were misunderstood anyway. Their lives were so unconventional because God's Word is so unconventional. God's Word goes against the natural grain of our thinking.

These prophets were not misunderstood because they used poor Hebrew grammar or they mumbled their words, or spoke with marbles in their mouths. These men were misunderstood, because their audiences for the most part rejected the message and then turned around and attacked the messenger. Being a prophet was a dangerous occupation. I can imagine that one southern Judean song was, "Momma, don't let your boy grow up to be a prophet." If the word from the Lord that you preached was good, you were applauded, then forgotten and neglected. If the word from the Lord that you preached was bad, then you were blamed as being the problem, blamed for being disloyal to the nation and bad for morale and therefore necessary to be punished or killed.

These men were part of a cluster of men known as the prophets. Although they certainly preached, it was their writing that has been preserved by God. In fact, by the time these OT prophets were done writing, they produced a “corpus of literature” a body of text that to this day stands unmatched and unequalled in the history of the world. For hundreds of years these men wrote God’s message to God’s people and to the rest of the world. As part of that message, God gave this world a peak at what His future plans were and still are. We live during amazing days. We are able to look back at many of the prophecies as already being fulfilled with utter amazement to their precision, even while we are able to look forward to God finishing his plan. Christmas amongst other things is a celebration of a promise made by God and a promise kept by God. God always keeps His Word. God always keeps His Word. (audience repeat) That Word is both a message of hope to the humble and judgment to the unrepentant. His Word is either a message of hope or a message of judgment depending on whether you are humble and obedient or stubborn and disobedient. Let me show you what I mean.

1. **Why did God raise up OT prophets?**

A. **To represent Him to the people.** – Deut. 18.15-16

The people of Israel were absolutely terrified of God. They did not want to see God or hear his voice because they were afraid they would die. So, God responded to this request and promised to raise up a prophet who would be a mediator. The office and function of a prophet was to represent God to the people by being the spokesperson or the mouthpiece of God. He would deliver to them the Word of the Lord. No one dared to stand at the base of Mt. Sinai and defy God while His voice thundered from the mountain and shook the ground and while smoke and lightning displayed his power. But now, a prophet, a man, a son, a brother, and fellow citizen was chosen to stand in the place of God. The thundering voice of God which sounds like the power of Niagra Falls was replaced by the lone call of man.

B. **To preach and record His Word.**

The prophet’s Word was in truth, not his own Word. These holy men of old spoke only as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. The true prophet could not and would not speak God’s Word on his own initiative, but would wait for the Word of the Lord to come to him. Then, and only then could he speak. God did not always work according the prophet’s timetable. He could not manipulate the timing or the content of the that which was revealed. As important as the speaking ministry of the prophet was, perhaps even more important was his writing ministry. The Word of God was recorded, preserved and studied by these men. We have clear evidence that Daniel studied Jeremiah and Ezekiel studied Daniel.

C. **To provide God’s meaning to historical events.**

The exodus of the people from the land of Egypt was not merely an amazing story of deliverance from evil oppression. The prophets let us know the meaning to this. This

along with so much of OT history was a redemptive event that shows off the fact that God loves redemption. God loves to rescue people from hopeless situations and show off his glory as a God who saves and delivers. The Law was not merely a code of conduct, a constitution per se to govern the actions of these people called the Israelites. The prophets showed us that this was a covenant between God and man sealed by the shedding of blood which pre-figured the New Covenant that would be established one day between God and man and sealed by the blood of the God-Man – Jesus Christ!

“These mighty, formative acts of God in behalf of his chosen covenant people were carefully recorded and their abiding significance preserved in writing for the generations to come.”¹ This enables us to know that the fingerprint of God is impressed upon every historical, political and military event. Although we do not know the precise significance that all of these events have in God’s greater plan, we know that they do have significance and meaning.

D. To protect them from the surrounding sins.

The nation of Israel was about to go into the land of Canaan. (Deut. 18) One of the reasons why God was giving Israel this land was because the Canaanites were so wicked that God had to punish their sin. God was using the Israelites as a part of his judgment upon their sin. But, sin causes brain damage. We can watch sin destroy someone’s life, even while we are tempted and drawn in by the very same sin, reasoning that we are the exception to the rule and that it will not affect us. It will affect you! The nation of Israel would learn of the immoral, pagan, idolatrous activities of the Canaanites. In taking over the land, they would discover the artifacts of life and evidences of their values. It is tempting to wonder what life like that would really be like.... God raised up prophets to warn his people and to be a voice of sanity amidst the incredible and inexplicable dullness and stupidity that sin brings with it.

E. To give hope by pointing to Christ.

For several thousand years God made it clear that the King, the Messiah, the Savior, the perfect prophet and the perfect priest would come in order to rule, re-order and redeem. Prophet after prophet made this clear. He was the Passover Lamb, the Scapegoat on the Day of Atonement, the Sin offering at the tabernacle, the Ram caught in the thicket that was slain instead of Isaac. He was the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night that protected and led his people and the rock that Moses struck. He was the Lord of Hosts who appeared to Joshua. He was the LORD Almighty whom Isaiah saw, the man of Daniel’s vision (10) and the One who sat on the throne in Ezekiel’s call.

Before we go on with point 2, I want to point out 5 principles that are clear from this fly over that we have done of some of the prophets:

1. The Ways of God do not always make sense right now – but they will.

¹ O. Palmer Robertson, The Christ of the Prophets, P&R Publishing Co., P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, NJ, p.3.

2. We are part of a heritage that is often misunderstood and ridiculed. One day we will be vindicated.
3. The message affects the messenger, but the message is more important than the messenger.

If God wants to use up and consume your life in order to get His message out – so be it. If He wants to use your weaknesses to show forth his strength – so be it. His message is more important us, the messengers.

4. Prophets were only responsible to do their part.

We cannot make people believe. But as God said to Ezekiel, your job is to tell them the truth. What the people do with it, is not your responsibility.

5. God often raised up the greatest of men in the darkest of days.

The champion caliber of many of these men stood out so strong because they often ministered in the midst of such unbelief and despair. These were men who did not allow the winds of culture to drive their ships, but setting their compass on God, they rowed hard to His shore. But, the best of the prophets at their best were still imperfect. And some of them were, well...less than stellar in their ministries. Jonah, for example was called to go east to Ninevah, but Jonah hated and despised the Ninevites.

Reminds me of the man who was laying in bed one Sunday morning, while his wife was trying to make him get out of bed for church. He said, “The sermons are boring, the service is dull, and the people are mean. Give me one good reason why I should get up and go to church.” She said, “Because you are the pastor.” Well, that is sort of like Jonah. God said, “go preach to the Ninevites.” And Jonah said, NO! If I preach to the Ninevites, then they may repent, and if they repent, then God will forgive them and I don’t want God to forgive them, I want God to crush them! So, instead of traveling east, Jonah attempted to travel west. But, that obviously did not work. It never does, when you go against God. Jonah’s ministry was wildly successful and he hated every minute of it. And his book ends with this pathetic, pouting, puckered prophet pitching a fit because so many people repented and turned to God.

Here is the irony. We need a prophet. We need someone to represent God to us and to communicate his Word, to give us meaning for the events of life, to protect us from sin and to give us hope. Although these prophets did that to some degree, they could not do that forever, because they either got old and died, or they were killed by their audience. Stephen asks a very convicting and pointed question to the Jewish leaders in Acts 7.52, “Was their ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?” The very prophets that are needed are easily rejected. We need a prophet who cannot be destroyed.

2. **We Need and Have a Perfect Prophet.**

Brothers and sisters, I am hoping that as you have listened to this message about the prophets that your heart was resonating with each point and that the Spirit of God was impressing upon you, that is Jesus! That is Jesus! You must listen to preaching, as I must preach with a Christo-centric view. In other words, you need to read the Bible with Jesus glasses. You need to listen to the Bible with Jesus hearing aids. What does this text have to do with Jesus, must be the cry of your heart. He is, after all the Hero of the Bible and therefore, the Lord of our lives and the Head of the Church and the King of the Kingdom. He is so much. He is our all in all. And as part of that all in all, He stands as the Perfect Prophet, the Perfect Priest and the Perfect King. From his earthly father's line he inherits the right to rule on David's throne. From his mother's line traced to Levi, he inherits the priestly line. And as the final and perfect and complete Word of God, He is the prophet that all the prophets spoke of.

- A. **He represents God to us** – He is God. (Emmanuel)
- B. **He communicates the Word** – He is the Word.
- C. **He provides meaning to all events** – He is the pinnacle and focal point of all History.
- D. **He provides protection from sin** – He is the Redeemer.
- E. **He gives ultimate hope** – He defeated death and lives forever more.

The history of the church is filled with examples of traditions that over time have lost their intended meaning and purpose. For over 10 years now, we have followed the custom of the advent Sundays. That is a custom that we do not have to follow, it is only a means of remembering. If all we do is light some candles, play some music and feel tingling, chilly bumps go down our spine, then we are wasting our time. I must protect us from letting traditions and customs be what defines us. God's truth does. I personally love what the advent candles represent, I just want to make sure they do just that. When you see the prophet candle lit, you know, the Word of the Lord brings light, to a very dark world at a very great cost, but always shows the way to the One who is the light.

Conclusion; Two things:

- 1) God's Word always wins. You will either stand on His Word or His Word will crush you.
- 2) Don't play life "safe". These men risked it all and lost (according to the world) and WON according to God.

Christmas is a celebration of a promise made and a promise kept. God always keeps his word. If you are declaring it, you will never be embarrassed, disappointed or let down. You will be vindicated, even if it is not in your life, you will be vindicated.