

The Prophets' Anxiety

Mark 6:1-6a

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Prayer: *Be with us, God, as your word unfolds before us in ancient words, made new by personal encounter. May we sense your faithfulness through the generations, surrounding and upholding us today. Meet us in our weakness with your strength, in our denials with your affirmation, and in our failures with renewed vision...*

Because we have so many writings of the Old Testament prophets, and writings about prophets, we actually have opportunities for good insight into their characters and into their deepest fears. Which they had a lot of – judging by the evidence.

Jesus was living in a Messianic age, which was following up an age of prophesy. (By contrast we do not live in a Messianic age...we live in a post-industrial age of technology.) In our scripture today Jesus refers to himself as a prophet.¹ Prophesy begins way back in Exodus -- Aaron and Moses were called God's prophets. The Israelite kings had court prophets – it was a paying job – Nathan famously prophesied King David's downfall after the regrettable Bathsheba episode. The word prophet means "one who speaks for another." And the prophets' job was to speak for God...which is where the anxiety comes in, if you try to do that for too long, too loudly, or in front of too many people... you might develop.... anxieties of your own. Prophets call people back to living in meaningful covenant with God, because they are surrounded by people who are not. The job is like being the only adult in a room full of children. Half the miracle is speaking the words; the other half is hearing them.

If you read the prophets' words about their own experience, you get the impression that no one listens to them, they are disrespected and ignored ... and would someone else take this job please because, honestly, "I don't need this aggravation, anymore"?! You may recall the prophet Jonah has no intention of prophesying to Nineveh, because, *why should he?* It's a thankless task, and they wouldn't listen if he did anyway...God has to swallow him with a whale to get him to change his mind, and go to Nineveh and tell the people what they need to hear to make better decisions. And he does; and they did.

There are two sides to **communication**: if you read the scriptures from the point of view of those who listened to the prophets...you don't hear about this abuse, instead you hear over and over again, how respected the prophets were, how dear to the community and to the people they served, how they could not imagine their life together as people of faith without their dear old, crazy, truth-telling prophet. How much they appreciate being reminded of the holy in their midst and their own best selves. Although the prophets complain...*a lot*...the evidence is in their favor ...by and large the prophets lived well, had long lives, and were deeply respected in their communities – I can't speak to whether they always *felt* respected or not, only we know that they were, from the historical evidence. If you were having to underwrite group Health Insurance

¹ Our major prophets are Ezekiel who prophesied from 593 – 571 BCE, Isaiah and Jeremiah, our minor prophets have given their names to the next 12 books in the Bible finishing out our Old Testament.

for them, you'd think they were a great group: Long lives, healthy, plenty of friends, prosperous – sure they had to get through a few things, but who doesn't?!

In Mark's gospel, Jesus is in the throes of the prophet's neurosis; he is not, as we say, "feeling the love." He has already been out preaching, teaching, healing and working miracles, on both shores of Galilee and in the middle of the Sea -- he comes to his hometown and goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath, and his neighbors... just couldn't believe their ears. They know this kid. They've watched him play in the yard outside, they've seen him doing his chores, another set of hands when it was harvest, he went to school with their boys, they remember his first steps and his awkward teenage phase, they saw him learn a trade – a carpenter who worked with his father Joseph, and his brothers --and they are named here-- sitting together, "James and Joses and Judas and Simon, not to mention his sisters here on the other side of the aisle." Mary and Joseph had a whole family after Jesus was born who everyone recognized in their synagogue; these people are witnesses to his life, and in their defense, his family members become some of his most effective disciples, but that is a later story, for now, the folks in the 'hood have trouble hearing him. In the way that you are already used to the kinds of conversations you have with your neighbor. You anticipate one kind of communication, even if you are hearing something new.

"Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." To them there, he was just Joe and Mary's boy, forgetting his place.

You have likely heard the saying "familiarity breeds contempt", which means...

- a. The better we know people, the more likely we are to find fault with them².
- b. If you know someone very well or experience something a lot, you stop respecting them.³
- c. The more you know something or someone, the more you start to find faults and dislike things about it or them.⁴

So JESUS LIMITED HIS MIRACLES... it says: "he could do no deed of power there except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them." (Mark 6:5)

- Meaning perhaps he just healed some blisters and beestings? Seasonal allergies and small fractures? Broke up a few fights?
- It wasn't that Jesus **could not** do miracles, just that he healed... "a few."
- Where people would not believe, he could not do a great work for them.

The problem wasn't in his abilities, but in the receiving of them.

² The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy

³ The Free Dictionary

⁴ UsingEnglish.com

The question which reaches from their time to ours is: Whom are we taking for granted? What wisdom, what healing, what deeds of power are we missing because we make judgments about how and through whom God's truth is communicated?

In our day we struggle with public conversation. What can we hear from someone speaking in political space? What truth can we hear from someone in the Black Lives Matter movement? The #metoo movement; The LGBTQ+ community? And in an age which has become increasingly divided, how can we use social media and yes, the powerful algorithms of Artificial Intelligence even, to share a good word, rather than to share judgment and condemnation? I'm sure you can think of instances of how it goes wrong...what would success look like?

I announced last week that I will be concluding my interim work with you on August 2. This has been coordinated with the Area Conference Minister and the leadership here at First Church. I am preparing to move to another Interim position at the Congregational Church of South Glastonbury; and First Church is preparing to move into the final months of transition as you prepare for your next settled pastor.

In the months to come you will be seeing new faces in this pulpit, new voices of unfamiliar prophets and pastors, shepherds and teachers; and you will be hearing the Search Committee's candidate for your next settled Pastor. The members of the search committee who have worked diligently on this will be expecting to hear that person's voice. The rest of you will not be... a new voice, a new minister, a new way of speaking and living the word. Attune your ears. I am confident you have this aptitude, we learned together throughout the pandemic to experience worship online. This next change will be more expected in many ways.

In our lives and in our church God is still speaking. How are we preparing to be part of God's next chapter of ministry here? How are you hearing God's prophetic word in your life?

So, to conclude, prophets develop a whole neurotic anxiety about who is listening and not listening, who can hear and not hear, and why these people ask them to prophesy and then don't listen when they do ... The truth is harsh -- the good news will skip right by those who are not listening for it. Jesus took his message elsewhere; it couldn't happen in his hometown. God's work will continue, whether we are on board or not.

Half the miracle is getting the words out – speaking them, the other half is hearing.

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