

Scripture

Luke 13:31-35

The Lament over Jerusalem

31 At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” 32 He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. 33 Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ 34 Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 35 See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Message – Be the prophet

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

This morning I’d like to focus on the passage from Luke. It’s a short reading, only four verses, but there are a few rather surprising things found in here.

Jesus had been going from town to town, healing, preaching, and proclaiming the Kingdom of God as he made his way to Jerusalem. Out of the blue, some Pharisees came and said to him, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.’

This seems a little surprising, doesn’t it? Weren’t the Pharisees supposed to be the bad guys in the New Testament? Aren’t the Pharisees the ones who are always trying to trap Jesus, to get him to say something that would be blasphemous so that they could discredit him and kill him? And yet, here we find some Pharisees who were warning Jesus that his life was in danger, warning him that Herod had heard of him and was looking for him.

Apparently there were good Pharisees. There were these Pharisees that warned Jesus as he was on his way to Jerusalem, there is another that we read about in Jerusalem as well – Joseph of Arimathea, the one who donated his family tomb so that Jesus’ body could be laid to rest. We encounter some good Pharisees on both sides of Jesus death.

Now, these good Pharisees are not the main part of this story; I just wanted to draw attention to this first line because it’s easy for us to fall into a routine, that as we read the bible and we read Pharisee, we often automatically think of small minded rule followers – the kind of people that would be great working in a government office renewing licenses or issuing building permits.

My point here is that good Pharisees are like good Samaritans – not what we expect. If we pay attention while we read, the bible will continually shake us out of our presuppositions and prejudices.

Enough of the rabbit hole – let's get to where we're headed. When Jesus encountered these good Pharisees he essentially brushed off their warning, and then he said something that should take us all by surprise.

He began to lament over Jerusalem, saying "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" Now Jerusalem is of course the capital city of the Jews where the great temple to God is. When Jesus speaks of Jerusalem he is speaking of God's people, and here he's saying that God's own people kill the prophets that God sends to them.

So who are these people that God's people are killing? What exactly is a prophet?

In our Christian tradition, prophets are understood to be people who speak and teach the Word of God. Although Jesus is so much more than a prophet, he stood in continuity with a prophetic tradition that continues even today. Prophets come in many shapes and sizes, and they speak about many different things, but the one thing they have in common, according to Jesus, is that the truth they speak is quickly rejected by those who have a stake in maintaining power and the status quo.

That is because prophets challenge the prevailing authority structures. Prophets speak and teach about God's truth, about God's power, and that threatens the truth and power of the day. In Jesus's time, he threatened the religious authorities and their control of how the people were to understand God.

Jesus questioned the integrity of those who were in charge, and challenged the power structure that they created that put all the authority and wealth into the hands of a few and turned the common citizens into powerless serfs.

Challenging the status quo is dangerous business. Jesus knew full well that by following the tradition of earlier prophets, that he would be forfeiting his life – he was putting a large target on his back.

But what I find surprising is not so much Jesus' condemnation of Israel's history of rejecting prophets, but the compassion that he showed next.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, 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, and you were not willing.

Jesus longed to gather Jerusalem under his wings. He wanted to comfort those very people who would reject him. He saw Jerusalem as a scattering of vulnerable chicks who were in need of protection, protection that he was willing to provide to the very people who would soon cry for his blood.

Unfortunately, Jerusalem also had a longing, and that longing was not to be under the protection of Jesus, nor was it to hear his prophetic message.

Giving Israel's history of treating prophets, as well as more recent history – think Martin Luther King Jr or Ghandi – the idea of being a prophet carries with it some trepidation. It seems more like something that we would want to avoid than something we'd intentionally try to be.

And yet, this is exactly what Jesus has asked of us. 'You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'

We're supposed to venture out into a hostile world and be prophets. If this is what we are to do, then we had best figure out what it means – flesh out the job description so that we will know if we are doing it well.

(At the risk of sounding flippant, the short answer is if they kill you, you are doing it right. If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first.)

Prophets are people who teach others about the Word of God. We often think of the prophets of old as people who cried out in the city square, but prophetic teaching happens everywhere, and most often in the classroom of everyday life. We know that people generally look to those around them to decide what to do and how to live.

We constantly compare ourselves with those around us – we see who is most successful, who is the smartest, the strongest, the thinnest, and who is kindest. For some, that kind of comparison is almost completely subconscious. For others, comparisons control every part of their life. Peer pressure is not something that applies only to teenagers, it is with us for most of our lives.

Since this is the case, then being a prophet, teaching others about the word of God, does not necessarily require standing on a street corner and shouting. Being a prophet means living a prophetic life that encourages others to recognize God in the world and in us. Living prophetically means living as a witness, living grounded in the truth of Jesus Christ.

Small shifts in behavior, small tweaks in our habits, can create big ripples in our lives and in the lives of those around us. For most of us, prophetic living is not the strongest habit in our lives. Going to church and being a part of a Christian community sounds good; but taking that identity out into the world, being a prophet in the other areas of our lives is often not a habit for us. But it should be.

Think of all the people in your life that have no connection to a faith community. Our friends, coworkers, neighbors-people at the pool, at the curling rink, at the drug store - there are so many, so many people who connect with us on a regular basis that know little about our spiritual life.

How many of those people live day-to-day, working hard, staying busy, just putting one foot in front of the other, but always hoping for something more? Honestly, how many of us live day-to-day, working hard, staying busy, but always hoping for more? God wants so much more for us, so much more than just the daily grind. God wants us to claim our purpose beyond ourselves, to show love in tangible, meaningful ways, and when our lives bear witness to the grace of God, we live as prophets to those around us.

Living prophetically means that we live God's word. We preach through actions, not words. This can be done by showing kindness to a stranger, responding with love instead of anger, or standing up with someone who is being treated unfairly. When we promote justice in our workplaces and homes, give more than we take, and treat others with love and respect, no matter who they are or what they have done, then we are living prophetically.

Now, a prophetic life is not an easy life. It will cost you. In Canada we don't have to worry about being stoned or put to death, as the prophets of old, or as some Christians in other areas of the world do. It's unlikely that we will suffer in that way, but there will be a cost. By trying to be treat others fairly rather than taking advantage of them, we may find that we don't get promoted as quickly at work, or we may not make as much money. The status quo rewards self-centeredness while compassion is seen as weak.

Supporting a small local business or market rather than a big box store may mean we pay a little more for some of our goods. If we factor into the price tag the costs of justice and human rights, it's going to cost us more to buy the things we need.

Giving to the poor and supporting charities will also cost us money. Giving to the church cost money. It's expensive to live prophetically. But it's not just about money, about where and how we work, shop or give.

Volunteering costs us time, caring for those who are down requires an emotional investment. Standing up for the rights of oppressed groups can cost us friends.

Prophetic living is hard work, but our broken world needs prophets and God has sent you and I to make a change. We are being called to bear witness to the radical truth of Christ, a truth that is as prophetic and vital, as threatening and as hopeful today as it was 2,000 years ago.

You have a prophetic voice to share with the world. Whether you have a generous heart, willing to give your last dollar to someone who needs it more than you do, or you have the courage to influence your neighbors in positive, hopeful ways, you have a prophetic voice; and God is calling you to make your voice heard. No act of love is too small. No witness of hope is too small.

We are witnesses in Norfolk to the transforming love of Jesus, and through our living we have the opportunity to shine God's light into the world. Jesus ended his lament of Jerusalem saying

'you will not see me again until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" Be that one who comes to others in the name of the Lord.

We have all been given unique gifts from God, gifts to share with the world. Do not let your gift go to waste. You do have a prophetic voice, and this broken world is ready to listen.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.