

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
January 28, 2007

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Luke 4:21-30

Prophet

Jeremiah was a Hebrew prophet, a somewhat reluctant prophet today's lesson tells us. In the gospel according to Luke, Jesus speaks about prophets not accepted in their hometown. What is a prophet? In its very simple form, a prophet is a messenger of God...a human being divinely inspired to bring God's word to the people. Prophets were important in ancient cultures where the written word was not accessible to all the people, where most people were unable to read or write. Prophets in our day are often viewed with skepticism for the understanding of prophecy is more about being clairvoyant, seeing the future before it happens, than about bringing a message from God.

Today's lesson from Jeremiah tells us that the call of God on one who is a prophet comes even before that prophet is born. Today's lesson from Luke tells us what can happen to prophets when they speak God's word as they believe God has given it.

Read Jeremiah 1:4-10.

What did Jeremiah say to God about being a prophet to the nations? "I don't know how to speak." Why? "Because I'm only a boy."

In this lesson from Luke, Jesus is in Nazareth, his hometown.

Read Luke 4:21-30.

What happens to prophets in their hometown? They are not accepted. And what happens to Jesus? He is run out of town and almost hurled off a cliff.

The people in Jesus' hometown didn't like something he said. At first, they are amazed at Jesus, Joseph's son, and his gracious words. What set them off? They had heard about the miracles that Jesus had done in Capernaum. Jesus has not done those things here in Nazareth. He tells them that no prophet is accepted in his hometown. Then Jesus uses the examples of the prophet Elijah going to the widow in Sidon and the prophet Elisha going to the leper Naaman, the Syrian. The Jews in the synagogue where Jesus was speaking were "filled with rage" at those words.

Why the rage? The widow of Sidon and the leper Naaman were not Jews and were certainly not of Nazareth. The wonder of "is this not Joseph's son" becomes "just who does this son of Joseph think he is."

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While Jesus is redefining who is the elect, he is not throwing out God's covenant with Israel—as evidenced by his honoring of the Sabbath, the scriptures, and the synagogue—but rather proclaiming that God's love has no boundaries. That's not a very popular message among those—found in every time and place—with a clear sense of who are the insiders and who the outsiders are.

The call of the prophet Jeremiah carries a similar theme: "I appointed you a prophet to the nations," set apart even while in the womb. This love of God for us, unlimited by time or human boundaries, is the same love reflected in the love we show. All prophetic powers, all knowledge, even all faith is nothing if not rooted in this love.

In other times we continue to have prophets who remind us that God's word is for all the people. Prophetic voices stepped forth to say that slavery was wrong and the abolition movement was born. Prophetic voices stepped forth to say that women were included in the declaration that all are created equal, and the suffrage movement was born. Prophetic voices continue to step forth and call us to care for the planet earth and to hear an inconvenient truth. Prophetic voices are needed as much today as in Jeremiah's day and Jesus' day.

"Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God" was the message from God that the prophet Micah spoke to the ancient Hebrews. Sometimes we modern, "why wasn't that done yesterday" people think that the issues of justice and peace should be complete. We forget the struggles of people throughout the history of the world and how long even small steps towards equality and justice take. When Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, all the slaves were freed that day. However, many had to wait until the war's end before they realized their freedom. The powers working against their freedom were still active even after their freedom was proclaimed. And while they may have been lawfully and legally free, the acceptance of their rightful and equal place in society took over another hundred years. And we still have work to do today in that arena of justice.

Being a prophetic voice...a voice that brings God's word of inclusive, radical, gracious love to our world...seems like it should be easier in this world of technological and scientific advancements. In this world of transplanting life-giving organs and tissues, of allowing childless couples to become parents, of using genetics to develop cures for illness, of transferring information around the world in seconds, one would think we could handle the news that God's love is for

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all. And with all these advancements it would seem plausible that God intends for us to bring good news to the poor by making hunger and poverty disappear.

Today the very things that have brought material blessings to so many, threaten us spiritually. Never has our world known such wealth, but never have we worshipped wealth more. Dazzled by material success, we have developed a new religion: the worship of progress itself. We have placed our faith in technology, and devote increasing billions to life-destroying arsenals. Whereas people once looked toward God for salvation, our culture now propels their daily lives toward the domination of nature and other human beings in a ceaseless quest for material accumulation. The search for the transcendent, mystical, supernatural reality of life is being supplanted by religious devotion to what is visible, tangible, and synthetic.

Perhaps one reason we cannot handle the good news to the poor is that it may mean we have to change something in our lives. Not since the depression and second world war have we had to depend on one another to get by. I wonder if that is one of the things that separates us from the truly poor...we can get by all on our own. We don't need a food pantry or a Salvation Army meal. We don't need food stamps or public assistance. What would happen if we lost that ability to get by on our own? Who would speak for us? Who would be the prophetic voice that says, "make hunger and poverty disappear?" Or would we hear the voices that say, "pull yourselves up by your bootstraps."

In his book *Night*, Elie Wiesel wrote about his horrifying childhood experiences in a Nazi concentration camp. Having gone without food or drink for three days, thousands of Jews were driven out of their barracks at dawn into a thickly falling snow and herded into a field. Forbidden to sit or even to move much, they stood in line until evening, waiting for the train that would take them deeper into Germany. The snow drifted in a layer on their shoulders.

Finally, their thirst intolerable, one man suggested that they eat the snow, but they weren't allowed by the guards to bend over. The person in front of that man said to eat the snow that had accumulated on the back of his shoulders. That act spread through the line, until there, in a frozen field, what had been individuals struggling with their separate pain became a community sharing their suffering together.

As we go into our lives on this cold day in January, Joan Chittister reminds us of three ancient truths to prod, provoke and energize our thinking and doing.

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The first, from the Zen, reads: No seed ever sees the flower.

The second, from the Talmud, teaches: You are not obliged to complete your work, but you are not at liberty to quit it.

And, finally, the Greeks record a conversation that calls us all: "Thucydides," they asked, "When will justice come to Athens?" And Thucydides answered them, "Justice will not come to Athens until those who are not injured are as indignant as those who are."

Who will be the prophet? Who will prod us in our day to do the good that must be done?

Amen.