

A Prophet is Not Welcome

I was Baptized and confirmed at Berkley: First United Methodist as many of you know. I didn't really get involved in the church until the youth group invited me in. It was at Berkley: First that I started realizing that I was being called into ordained ministry. And so, after my first year at Asbury College, Berkley: First hired me as an intern for the summer and invited me to give my very first sermon. I worked for about a month on that sermon and it was about 12 pages long. The title of my first sermon was "Here I Am, Lord! Send Someone Else!" which I personally thought was very clever.

I remember preaching that day and being absolutely terrified. So as I preached, I talked really fast and my 12 page sermon ended up being about 5 minutes long. When I sat down, one of the matriarch's of the church who happened to be the lay reader for the morning, dramatically looked at her watch when I sat down. It is hard to go back to your home church to preach.

Today's scripture begins in the middle of a story in the Gospel of Luke, so if you were confused, or if you aren't quite sure what this passage was all about, have no fear.

We'll go over what Jesus did and why his followers were praising him in verse 22 and then wanted to throw him off a cliff by verse 29.

Now, part of the reason this passage might be hard to understand is because it's a reaction to an event that we don't actually hear about in this set of scriptures. Just before the sequence of events that we heard this morning, Jesus goes to the temple in his hometown of Nazareth and reads from the Torah scroll. He reads a famous passage from the prophet Isaiah that says, "The Spirit of our God is upon me; because the Most High has anointed me to bring good news to those who are poor. God has sent me to proclaim liberty to those held captive, recovery of sight to those who are blind, and release to those in prison – to proclaim the year of our God's favor."

These are verses 18 and 19 of Luke Chapter 4 and our story for today is picked up on verse 21. So, when his hometown community hears him reading in the temple they are impressed and very surprised.

They ask each other, "Is this Mary and Joseph's Son? Or as they said at Berkley, "Is that Carol and Dick's daughter, the one that used to climb under the pews to race toward the front?" Is this the Jill that had huge water fights on lock ins at the church?.....but I digress!

We have known Jesus his whole life, since he was a little boy. We didn't know he could read the Torah, and now he's claiming to be anointed by God to bring good news to us!

Would you look at that, our little Jesus has grown up and now he's our town's pride and joy!

So this festive spirit in the crowd lasts for a just a few minutes and then things go south really fast.

But Jesus doesn't revel in their accolades; he doesn't accept their fanfare. In fact, he rebukes them because he knows they're going to abandon him. He says "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town.

Then he goes on to say, "But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months and there was a severe famine

over all the land; yet Elijah, was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

In just a minute we'll get back to the significance of the people and the circumstances that Jesus is talking about. But Jesus either accurately predicts the future or his prophecy manifests it, because sure enough, he is right. He said they wouldn't accept him and immediately after he said these things “all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of town and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.”

Jesus' followers were mad because what he said did not meet their expectations. There's a famous saying that goes 'disappointment is expectations minus reality.' I mean, Jesus followers had really high expectations, especially after hearing Jesus read in the Temple. And when the reality of what he said was so vastly different from what they expected, they got mad.

You see, the Galileans, or people who lived in Galilee at the time, they were considered second class citizens.

Judeans, or people from Judea would have looked down on those from Galilee as peasants, common or dirty people. And the people from Nazareth, Jesus' own people, they were in the larger region of Galilee, so they were part of the group who was treated in this oppressed way. It's natural for any of us who are oppressed or who have been treated unfairly to want balance restored.

We want to be vindicated for what's happened to us, we want retribution! Jesus' followers thought, “This is great, he's the one we've been waiting for! Finally the tide is going to turn, we are going to be on top and those Judeans are going to know what it's like to suffer.

Well, as usual with Jesus, he doesn't deliver what the people expect. They thought he was going to give them preferential treatment because he is one of them. They thought he was going to look out for them, but they were mistaken.

The people in Nazareth were way too self interested and too worried about their own self-preservation. And Jesus tells them that God's concern isn't only for them but for *all the oppressed*. It's not about having them on top instead of the Judeans, its about leveling the playing field so that everyone is equal, because God is the God for everyone.

He illustrates this message through the examples he uses. He says “Look at the prophet Elijah and what he did. There was a famine all over the land, but he wasn't sent to the 'chosen people,' to the Jews or to the Israelites, he went to a pagan widow from Zarephath.

And then there were many lepers in Israel, and did God send the prophet Elisha to heal any of the Israelites? No. God sent Elisha to heal Namaan, the Syrian leper. Elijah and Elisha helped the outcasts, the pagan widow and the Syrian. They cut right through the in-group of Israelites and helped the people on the outside, on the margins.

So, problem number one is that Jesus doesn't immediately align himself as the great defender of the Galileans, which makes his local community angry. And he doesn't promise them vindication which makes his local community angrier.

In fact, as I mentioned before, in the scripture immediately preceding this, he quotes the prophet Isaiah but he leaves out a very interesting piece of this prophetic statement.. So he's going along word for word, saying he will "proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God's favor. and that's where the scripture in the Gospel of Luke stops.

Whereas in the book of Isaiah, chapter 61, that Jesus is quoting, the prophet says, "The Spirit of God is upon me, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of God's favor, **and the day of vengeance of our God...**" Jesus leaves out that whole day of vengeance stuff. It's like Jesus was reading the Torah scroll in the Temple, got to that line and said, "hmmmm, nope." I am not proclaiming the day of vengeance, that's not the relationship I have with God.

The problem is that this is what his followers and his hometown people were expecting but he didn't deliver.

So when they hear that they are not going to be vindicated, and that he won't favor them, just as Elijah and Elisha didn't favor the local people, they get mad and they try to hurl him off a cliff, but the text says, "he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

The writer of the Gospel of Luke doesn't explain exactly what he means by Jesus passing through the people and avoiding being thrown off the cliff, so we are left to interpret that as we choose.

Sometimes Jesus gets this reputation for being spineless. People will mockingly quote his mandate to turn the other cheek, indicating that he's weak. But I think this scripture took some incredible courage. Jesus is so committed to his faith that he knows he doesn't answer to the people he grew up with. He does love them, but his loyalty to God is much stronger than any allegiance he might have to them.

He would be the worst politician, going to his hometown where he's guaranteed to get the vote, and instead manages to turn everyone against him. He tells them what he knows to be true, not what they necessarily want to hear, and it caused him to quickly lose his golden boy status.

Being a prophet isn't popular and it often causes backlash. Think about every single social movement from the abolition of slavery to the women's right to vote, to the Civil Rights movement to the gay rights movement. In every single one of these huge waves of social change, people lost their lives for the cause. The first people to stick their necks out in favor of it, they were often martyred for the cause.

It's our responsibility to not give into the status quo but to be brave and faithful enough to name injustice and to do something about it when we see it. We, too, can be prophets.

Prophets don't foretell the future as a lot of people think. They tell the truth about the present, they name it, and then they give hope to God's presence. I have found, in my life, that I usually don't experience backlash for naming all the problems in the world. When I talk about war and poverty and how we're slowly making the planet an inhospitable place to live, people usually agree with all that, and they not with a sense of resigned, defeated acceptance.

But when you get into part two, to the good news, that the story isn't finished, that a better world or a better future lies ahead, and we are the ones who can change it, then people start to look at you like you're irrational.

I was serving as an associate pastor at a very well to do church in the northern suburbs of Detroit. The members there, for the most part were very well off. And I as the associate pastor, was given one Sunday a month to preach on whatever I wanted. So of course, one Sunday I picked was Luke 6:20-26. And in case you haven't memorized it, let me read it to you. "You who are poor are blessed, for the reign of God is yours. You who hunger now are blessed, for you'll be filled. You who weep now are blessed, for you'll laugh. You are blessed when people hate you, when they scorn and insult you and spurn your name as evil because of the Chosen One. On the day they do so, rejoice and be glad, your reward will be great in heaven, for their ancestors treated the prophets the same way.

At this point, all the congregation is smiling and listening until I got to the next verse – "But woe to you rich, for you are now receiving your comfort in full. Woe to you who are full, for you'll go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you'll weep in your grief. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for their ancestors treated the false prophets in the same way."

Woe to you, rich! I talked about how they were favored to change to world for everyone around them. I thought it went well, and people were nice afterward. Then the Senior Pastor pulled me into his office. He said these words, I will never forget them. "I know, Jill that God has called you to be a prophet." And I responded with, "Wow, thanks". Then he said, It is one of the hardest callings placed upon a person. Yours will be a difficult road to walk."

Prophets don't foretell the future. They tell the truth about the present, they name it, and then they give hope to God's presence in the world.

As a person of faith, I have unwavering commitment to Christianity and the good we can do in the world because of our faith. And I believe in the inherent goodness and worth of all people and I believe that a peaceful, more prosperous future is possible for all the people in our world if we work together to make it so.

But even when we are surrounded by darkness and doubters, it is our responsibility to testify to the light, because, as they say, the darker the night, the brighter the light shines.

If we don't believe in a better future, then we have given into the fatalistic notion and our light goes out and we become part of the darkness.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Whatever you do, you need courage. Whatever course you decide upon, there is always someone to tell you that you are wrong. There are always difficulties arising that tempt you to believe your critics are right. To map out a course of action and follow it to an end requires some of the same courage that a soldier needs. Peace has its victories but it takes brave men and women to win them."

We are part of the movement to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed.

As Christ-followers, as people who believe in something greater than ourselves, we have a responsibility to do our part in making God's favor a reality.

And it won't be a reality for only our community or only our country or only our religion.

Jesus preached liberation for all people. All people. He had the courage to speak out and he was rejected by his own community and eventually lost his life because of his prophetic preaching. The least we can do is devote our lives to make his prophecy a reality. Amen