

Why Prophets Are Not Welcome

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30

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I started preaching when I was 15, long before I should have. I cringe now when I think of some of the things I said back then. One of the reasons I am a Baptist is the freedom we grant. However, I've come to realize that freedom is a two-edged sword. It includes the freedom to preach sermons before one is spiritually and emotionally mature enough to do so.

One of my favorite sermons back then came from the passage in Jeremiah I read earlier. Like me at that time, Jeremiah was young, "only a boy," he says. But God told Jeremiah not to say that he was "only a boy" because God was going to send him out with a grown up message to the nations.

I think I unconsciously saw myself as a Jeremiah, a young prophet with a message to the nations. But what I failed to do was read the rest of the book of Jeremiah. His life wasn't all accolades and pats on the back. He had a message alright, a message that was hard to hear, a message the people of Israel did not want to hear. They finally heard enough of young Jeremiah. One day the priests, the other prophets of the land, and the people laid hold of Jeremiah. "You shall die!" they shouted. Listen to this: "And all the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of the Lord." Fortunately he was spared.

It's not easy work being a prophet. Jesus learned this early in his life too. Luke uses this story of Jesus' inaugural sermon in the temple in an interesting way. Matthew and Mark record this story also, but they both place it later in Jesus' life. Luke moves it to the beginning of his ministry—not just chronologically but "programmatically," as one person says (Fred Craddock, *Interpretation*, p. 61). This event in his hometown of Nazareth establishes who Jesus is, what his ministry and message will be, and how the people will respond. One day the priests,

the other prophets of the land, and the people will gather around and lay hold of Jesus. "Crucify, crucify him!" they will shout.

Luke sets the stage for all that by positioning this story at the beginning. Everything was going just fine at first. The people of Nazareth were rightly proud of Jesus. He was their homegrown boy. They gave accolades and plenty of pats on the back. I suspect they were expecting God's blessing upon their little village. After all, Jesus was one of them. But Jesus began to say that God's blessing wasn't only for them. It was for the poor, the captives. Then he said something they could not accept, words that so enraged them that they tried to kill Jesus. He told them that God's blessing included the Gentiles, those outsiders, the ones they believed were not chosen by God. How dare him! Even if he was Joseph's boy. Even if he did grow up across the way. How dare him! Not those people!

Here's how Luke describes what happened next:

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Jeremiah learned. Jesus did too. Prophets are not welcome. Prophets speak uncomfortable truth. It's not that they speak a lie. They speak a truth that is not popular, that is unsettling. It challenges something deep within people, long held biases, beliefs taught by mothers and fathers and grandparents. Being a prophet is dangerous.

I talked with Dr. Fisher Humphreys recently. Many of you know he was the interim pastor here 20 years ago. Good man. Fine scholar. I remember hearing him say once that one of the hardest things for adults to do is change a fundamental belief. When we're presented with an uncomfortable truth, sometimes it is easier for us to kill the prophet than to change.

Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!"... Pilate, wanting to release Jesus,

addressed them again; but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him." But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted.
(Luke 23:18-24)

A Prayer of Confession is printed in our worship guide. Please join me as we confess our sins together.