

## Those Pesky Prophets!

Jesus' host in today's Gospel lesson says to himself,

“If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him ...

He is thinking of Jesus as a prophet in the sense of having insight into people's character, but that's one small part of what a prophet says and does.

What is a prophet? Someone who predicts the future?

- The biblical prophets act as the conscience of God's people ... reminding them to get back on track when they forget what is right ...
  - Their message is often “That's not fair!”
- And, yes, they do predict the future ... but they are more concerned with the consequences of present behavior ...
  - Their message is often “You'll be sorry!”

We are at that time in the cycle of readings when Elijah the Prophet pops up in our Old Testament readings for a couple of Sundays ...

Elijah is God's messenger to King Ahab

- Northern Kingdom ... capital city: Samaria
- Married to a princess named Jezebel
- Owns a nice summer palace in the hills outside of his capital

Proposes to buy a vineyard from his next-door neighbor Naboth ...

Ahab's proposal goes like this ...

- “It's near my summer house. I want to grow vegetables there.”
- “I'll give you a better vineyard.”
- “I'll pay you good money. What's your price?”

Sounds reasonable, doesn't it?

But Naboth's responds in a way that gives us a hint that something is fishy ...

- “No can do, Your Majesty. It's my ancestral inheritance.”

You see, Ahab is on the verge of breaking the Law of Moses just by making the offer:

- Numbers 36:9 says this – No inheritance shall be transferred from one tribe to another; for each of the tribes of the Israelites shall retain its own inheritance.

- Numbers 27:6-11 discusses a specific case – And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>7</sup>The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them. <sup>8</sup>You shall also say to the Israelites, "If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. <sup>9</sup>If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. <sup>10</sup>If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. <sup>11</sup>And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance ..."

Property stays in the family ... but King Ahab is consumed by greed ... he goes to bed and sulks ...

- We wonder if this might be a lifelong pattern of behavior, don't we?
- Ahab is sick with toxic greed ... think of King Midas, whose greed for gold robbed him of food and drink ... and even his daughter.

The contrast to the woman of the city in the Gospel reading is stark ...

- Ahab wants more for himself ...
- She gives extravagantly.

But, back to our story ... Jezebel enables him by giving him the attention he craves and stroking his ego:

- "Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful;
- "I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

Jezebel whips up a conspiracy to make it happen ...

- hires scoundrels to slander Naboth,
- fools a jury of honest citizens, who order the death penalty, and ...
- Naboth is wrongly executed.

Elijah shows up just as Ahab takes possession of the vineyard ...

- Ahab, who obviously has a guilty conscience, says: "Have you found me, O my enemy?"
- Elijah answers, "I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, I will bring disaster on you."

When you hear the word prophet, what do you think of ...

- Seers and Foretellers of the future?
- Miracle workers?
- Messengers from God?

Yes, Elijah is a messenger from God who works miracles and who foretells the future ... in this case, he predicts disaster on King Ahab ...

But ... even bigger and more important ... and in almost every case ...

- Prophets call rulers to moral account – especially for their mistreatment of disadvantaged people (whom, we hear over and over, God loves) and
- Prophets call people back to the God who loves them

The first task is unpopular, hard and even dangerous ... but the people needed to hear God's judgments

Prophets appear throughout the history of God's people Israel.

- Many, like Elijah and his successor Elisha, left only vivid memories of their deeds.

The biblical prophets all had a way with words ... some coined memorable summaries of biblical faith that we find in their writings:

- Micah: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"
- Amos: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

And beyond the messages of judgment, they can also bring visions of hope

- Isaiah: "He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

The prophets can be pesky (as Elijah was to Ahab), but they and their message are vital to our well-being as God's people.

Yes, prophets are pesky, but the prophetic spirit is in our Bible and in our DNA as a church ...

- It's why our church says that one of its Great Ends ... its reasons for being ... is to promote social righteousness and ...
- It's why our church dares to talk about social issues,
- It's why our General Assembly ticks people off every now and then by taking positions on controversial issues!

A hundred years ago, the writer G. K. Chesterton penned a prophetic hymn. Was he thinking about the outrage that King Ahab committed against Naboth the Jezreelite when he wrote it? Listen ...

O God of earth and altar,  
bow down and hear our cry,  
our earthly rulers falter,  
our people drift and die;  
the walls of gold entomb us,  
the swords of scorn divide,  
take not thy thunder from us,  
but take away our pride.

Those pesky prophets are the thunder that teaches us “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.”

May we listen when those pesky prophets speak!

How majestic is the name of the LORD our God!