

Praying with the Prophets: Haunted by the Word of the Lord

A Prophet's Monologue, delivered on October 31st, 2021 at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, 2021

Congregant (In front of Webcam): Does anyone know where Zac went? He's supposed to be preaching on "Praying with the Prophets," but I don't see him here?

Enter the Prophet Jeremiah, looking tired and mumbling to himself..... (comes in view of webcam)

Congregant: Oh, hello. Who are you and what are you doing here?

Jeremiah: Huh? Oh.....my name is Jeremiah. And, what I'm doing here, well, I'm not entirely sure. The Lord seems to have led me here today. What is this place, anyway?

Congregant: This is Bloomingdale Mennonite Church and this is where we worship the LORD together. We were expecting our Pastor to preach to us about "Praying with the Prophets", but we can't seem to find him.

Jeremiah: Ah, those shepherds, you've gotta keep your eye on them. "Praying with the Prophets," you say!? Well, I could tell you a few things about that! Although I'm not particularly excited about the prospect.....being a prophet isn't exactly a glamorous job after all; in fact, it's most often quite painful.

Congregant: Wait a minute! Jeremiah? Jeremiah! As in, THE Prophet Jeremiah who spoke God's judgment and promise to the people of Judah in the 7th and 6th centuries BC!?!?

Jeremiah: Ok, now you are just making me feel old. Yes, yes....I am that Jeremiah.

Congregant: Well, this is perfect! You can preach to us today on "Praying with the Prophets"!

Jeremiah: (SHAKES HEAD) I don't think you want me to do that?

Congregant: Why not?

Jeremiah: It's not always a pretty topic. The Word that the Lord gave me back in my day was not comforting. In fact, it was rather...haunting. Are you willing to be haunted by the Word of the Lord?

Congregant: Well....if you put it that way, I'm not so sure but....let me check with everyone here. Are we ok with listening to Jeremiah share even if it might make us a bit uncomfortable? *(Looks to congregation...waits for positive response)*

Jeremiah: Ok. But you can't say that I didn't warn you. *(Pauses, confused)* Do I just stand here?

Congregant: Do you mind going up to the pulpit over there?

Jeremiah: Alright, alright....

**Congregant sits down, Jeremiah goes to microphone.*

A Jeremiah Monologue

So, you want me to talk to you about “praying with the Prophets?” Well, let me tell you, one of the more shocking moments in my prophetic ministry came when God forbade me to pray for the people. That’s right. God forbade me to pray. Judah had turned away from God. Evil acts abounded. Falsehood was the norm. Everywhere you looked there was worship of false gods—God’s that asked us to do all manner of wrong things in our sacrifices. And I was not to pray for the people of Judah. This was rather shocking, for me, you see. Everyone knows that a prophet is supposed to pray to God on behalf of the people.

Take Moses, for example. When Israel was complaining and wishing they had died in Egypt or in the desert rather than face the difficulties of entering the land of promise, God was fed up and told Moses that maybe it was time to be done with Israel (Numbers 14:11-12). Moses wouldn’t stand for it! He interceded on Israel’s behalf; He reminded God of the promises God had made to Israel; He pointed out to God that God had claimed to be slow to anger and abounding in love (Numbers 14:13-19). Moses’ prayer worked! God relented and forgave the wayward people! The prophet’s prayers were heard!

Or take Samuel. When Israel was facing down the Philistines, Samuel told Israel to return to the LORD with all their heart, [and]... put away the foreign gods...from among [them]” (1 Samuel 7:3). The people responded obediently, and then “Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him” (1 Samuel 7:9) and delivered Israel from the Philistines. I heard these stories as a young boy and couldn’t believe the boldness of Moses and Samuel—the way that they pleaded with God on behalf of Israel made a deep impression on me.

Well, imagine my surprise when I, a young boy at the time, was called to be God's prophet to Judah beginning during the reign of King Josiah. It wasn't long before I could really begin to relate to Moses and Samuel. I saw all manner of evil among my people. Lies, oh, lies! The people of Judah bent "their tongues like bows" (Jer. 9:3). You couldn't trust your closest neighbor. And injustice! There was no care for "the orphan, to make it prosper, and [no defense of] the rights of the needy" (Jeremiah 5:28). The priests were corrupt, our King was corrupt, and even my fellow prophets were corrupt (Jeremiah 2:8, 23:11). People were worshipping false Gods and going after whatever seemed to make them happy with no regard for the law of God. Things were bad while most people, including the prophets, were saying "we're fine! The Lord's on our side" (Jer. 6:14). The people didn't even recognize their own evil; they were so deceived and self-assured. But I saw through the lies to the truth. The Lord made it plain to me and *I, reluctant though I was, I had to make it plain to the people*. You can imagine this made me unpopular. There were threats on my life (11:18-23), the King burned my scrolls (Jeremiah 36), I was even arrested and thrown in a deep muddy cistern (37:13, 38:6). Did people think that I wanted to be called to preach this unpopular message? I was ready to pack it in a number of times, but the Lord would not let me. Every time I tried to hold in the message God gave me to speak, it was like there was a "fire...in my bones." (20:7-9) I had to speak.

But more than just showing me the evil among my people, the Lord also made something else plain to me. Remember before when I said that the Word of the Lord was haunting? I'll tell you why: the Lord showed me that Judah's evil would have a consequence; the armies of Babylon were coming. Just as Assyria had destroyed the Northern kingdom of Israel over a century before, so now the southern Kingdom of Judah would be destroyed.

Foreseeing this consequence, I remember once crying out:

My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war. Disaster overtakes disaster, the whole land is laid waste. Suddenly my tents are destroyed, my curtains in a moment. How long must I see the standard, and hear the sound of the trumpet?" (Jeremiah 4:19)

It shouldn't be surprising that some people called me the "weeping prophet." I tried to reason with the people and call them to repent (Jeremiah 4:1-4), but no one wanted to listen. Haunted by the vision of impending disaster for Judah, what could I do at this point but plead with the Lord!? That's what a prophet is supposed to do, right! I started to picture myself as Moses or as Samuel, pleading with God. Despite the corruption around me, I even began thinking through the details of intercessory prayers; what I could say to make God avert this coming disaster and judgment upon Judah's evil actions. Imagine my surprise, then, when the Word of the Lord came to me, not once, but multiple times saying:

...do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you. (Jeremiah 7:16) ...do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble. (Jeremiah 11:14) Do not pray for the welfare of this people. (Jeremiah 14:11)

"Really, Lord?" I asked. But you listened to Moses and Samuel. What about me? The Lord's answer crushed my Spirit:

Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go!...Those destined for pestilence, to pestilence, and those destined for the sword, to the sword; those destined for famine, to famine, and those destined for captivity, to captivity. (Jeremiah 15:1-2)

You wanted to know what it was like to "pray with the prophets?" In my case, I was forbidden to pray for my people for a long time. "What am I doing here?" I thought. Why do I have to be the "weeping prophet?"

What happened next, well, my prophetic warnings of impending judgment unfortunately proved true. Jerusalem fell, conquered by Babylon. Some of my people were left to fend for themselves in the ruins of Jerusalem, myself included, and many were taken into captivity in Babylon. Some prophet, I thought. I will go down in history being the prophet that could ultimately only bring bad news. Then, one day, the Lord surprised me by asking me to write a letter to the exiles that had been sent to Babylon. I was to tell the exiles that they were going to have to stay in Babylon for seventy years. This was all part of the judgment they had to face. Contrary to some prophets that were saying the exile would only last for a little while (27:16), I had to tell the exiles to

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

I, Jeremiah the prophet, could now start praying for my people and I could instruct them to pray too, but now my prayers and their prayers were to be directed toward the city to which they were exiled for a time. "God, be good to the inhabitants of Babylon!" Can you imagine!? I knew that Babylon would face judgment one day too (Jeremiah 50-51). It's not as if Babylon were blameless in all of this, you know. But for the time being, my people were to set up shop there and do their best to worship God in a foreign land. And God began to show me that someday, after this period of judgment and exile, God would restore my people. While there was no escaping the consequences of their evil actions, God nonetheless promised something new for my people; a day of rejoicing; a time for a new covenant between God and my people; and on that day, God said, the people's hearts would be changed (Jeremiah 31). The Lord told me about this change:

I will put my law within them, [God said], and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

It was a wonderful word of hope. (*Reflective*) Ah, those were difficult times and yet times of promise too. I don't know what kind of times you people from the nations find yourselves in right now, but, if you wonder how you should pray to the Lord of heaven and earth, if you wonder what you can learn from "praying with the prophets," I have a few words of advice. First, pray that the Lord would show you the truth about the world around you—the truth about what is good and right to do in the world—and when the Lord reveals to you that truth, don't be afraid to speak that truth, be it to those in power or to those in your community. And, don't be fooled by those who say "All is good!" or "Peace, peace, [even] when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14). Where you see injustice or falsehood, name it, and call for the better way.

Second, pray that God would give you a spirit that is open to hearing the truth spoken to you from prophets around and among you, even, perhaps especially, if it makes you uncomfortable. It sure made my people uncomfortable. They wouldn't listen to the Lord's words of judgment that I was called to speak against their falsehood. Will you listen when the Lord speaks to you through prophetic voices? And, most importantly, remember that God has written the law on your hearts. Will you take time to listen for that law in prayer? You've probably heard what the Lord requires of you, what the good and holy law of God asks of you, but are you willing to be the kind of people whose hearts are open to God's law changing you from within? I couldn't help but notice some of the signs you have up front here: words of confession from the Psalms, words that ask the Lord to make you a people of truth, wisdom, and a right spirit. As a prophet of the Lord, I can only hope that all people that seek the Lord, from all nations (Jeremiah 3:17), would be a people with right spirits within them.

Finally, wherever the Lord leads you in life, seek the well-being of those around you and pray for them. When the Lord led me to pray for Babylon and instruct the exiles to pray for Babylon, the Lord taught me that even when you can't see God at work, God is at work where you are: in the lives of your neighbors, your friends, in the lives of strangers too, and even in your enemies. Pray for their well-being, because their wholeness and well-being is a part of your wholeness too. Well, I hope I've given you something to think about when it comes to "praying with the prophets." I'm afraid this old prophet has babbled on long enough, though. Time for me to hit the road again. (**Yells while walking away**) I hope you find your lost Pastor.....

Prophet exits....