

# **Messengers of God: The Prophets, an Introduction**

A sermon preached by Zac Klassen at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church  
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**Text:** Isaiah 6:1-13

Good morning! It is good to be together again after we took a one-Sunday pause here at BMC to join our local perimeter cluster of Mennonite Churches at St Jacobs MC for our labour day service. And it is good to be together again at the turn of Summer as we head into the Fall with all that brings for a new school year for school-children, for the changing of the seasons and the coming Fall with the bountiful harvest. Already the weather is feeling quite fall-like at times! With these changes come changes for us in our worship at BMC as well as we begin a new worship series that will lead us all the way to the beginning of Advent! What series could possibly carry us all the way into the end of November!? Well, as our worship committee met and discerned possibilities, we landed on a worship series on the Prophets, provocative and lively figures found throughout scripture who lead, provoke, challenge, and animate God's people to ever greater faithfulness and praise of God in word and in deed!

Already, during our children's time, I've tried to help us begin to expand our imaginations as to who a Prophet might be, what they might look like, and what they might do. It is a natural question when discussion "The Prophets" to ask, "Who were they? And what was the nature of their prophetic vocation?" As I began to prepare for this series, I was quite surprised to discover just how *diverse* the lineup of biblical prophets is *and* just how multi-dimensional the prophetic vocation can be! As for the lineup of prophets, it is important to remember that you don't have to flip all the way to Isaiah in your bible to encounter a prophet! While the Christian bible was put together in such a way as to group together a large collection of prophets towards the end of the Old Testament, the truth is that prophets appear throughout the Bible, from the

beginning to end. Interestingly, if you ever open a Jewish bible, you will notice that the division of books is different, with the “Prophets” division including not only books like Isaiah and Jeremiah but also the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings given the appearance of important leaders and prophets in all these books. Prophets, it seems, show up all over the bible. In fact, already in the book of Genesis, Abraham is referred to by God as a prophet (Gen. 20:7). This might surprise some of us – I know it surprised me, however some of you may be aware that in Judaism and Islam, Abraham is considered a very important prophet of God. Soon after Abraham, some of the other well-known early prophets of the Bible include a trio of prophets that we will hear more about next week, namely Aaron, Miriam, and Moses, those great leaders of Israel that were instrumental in leading the people out of slavery in Egypt. Miriam’s appearance in this list should disabuse us of any notion that prophets were primarily men. In the book of Judges, for example, we encounter a prophet named Deborah and in the book of Kings and Chronicles we encounter a prophet named Huldah, both of whom we will also learn about later in the series as well. And then of course there come the familiar prophet names: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets whose books span from Hosea to Malachi, with Daniel also being included in the Christian collection as a prophet.

As we approach the New Testament, prophets continue to appear, with the prophet Anna who worshipped in the temple and praised God after seeing Jesus as a child. While Mary, the mother of Jesus, is not named as a prophet in the New Testament, she is Miriam’s namesake and her Magnificat echoes Miriam’s song. John the Baptist was a prophet and Jesus himself identified as a prophet. And, as we read about the journeys of the early church, we learn that prophets continue to play a role there, too. In sum, then, the prophets of the bible are a *diverse*

*group* – men and women, young and old, speaking from a place of privilege and speaking from the margins, living in different geographic regions, and tied to different centers of religious life.

If the lineup of prophets in scripture is quite diverse, what about the prophetic vocation itself? What, really, were the prophets up to and what, exactly, was “prophecy?” The title on your bulletin suggests a basic account of the prophetic vocation as that of “being a messenger of God.” A prophet, then, is someone who has been summoned or called by God to deliver a message to the people of God. A prophet is God’s mouthpiece, you might say. Sometimes this message is quite specific and direct and so many prophets will begin their speeches with words like those we find in Isaiah chapter 1: “Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the LORD has spoken....” Other times the message can be more general and can be communicated through the day-to-day wisdom and leadership exhibited by the prophet.

I think that popularly, prophets are thought often to have been ‘predictors of the future.’ There is no shortage of materials on the Christian book market attempting to show that biblical prophets not only predicted events in their own time but that they also predicted events to come in our future, too. While the predictive aspect of the prophetic vocation was certainly present in some of the prophets of the bible –they were, after all, sometimes referred to as “seers”—prediction was not necessarily the primary or most common activity of the prophet and where it was present, it was limited to the specific timeframe the prophet spoke it in. I think, then, that most of the predictive readings of the prophets on the market are a distraction from some of the more tangible, present tense changes the prophets really do call us to today. Rather than worrying about devising a predictive script for our future out of the ancient prophet’s message, we might instead learn how their time-specific messages to communities living the realities of warring

nations, environmental disasters, and religious conflicts have obvious parallels in our time too. If those parallels are there, their prophetic messages can speak to us in their own way today too.

Frequently, prophets were leaders among the people whose vocation was to highlight and center the importance of ethics in the community – caring for the poor, the widow, and the orphan, seeking justice for the oppressed. Prophets were also great “imagers,” people who discerned the current course of world events –often dire or grim—and imagined alternative, hopeful paths leading through or away from destruction. Prophets were also “performers,” who engaged in musical performances and symbolic actions means to provoke, inspire, or encourage those around them to follow God and give God praise. Prophets were writers and poets who used their written and spoken words to persuade others around them to faithful living. So, we begin to see how the prophetic vocation is diverse, involving the prophet in any number of different forms of prophetic expression. Throughout this worship series, I hope that we will discover how the diversity of the different prophetic characters in the bible is matched only by the diversity of their prophetic actions as they seek to be messengers of God to the people they address.

Another important feature of the Prophet’s vocation that we only briefly touched on but was quite evident in our scripture reading today was “the call” of the prophet to be sent by God as a messenger. We don’t have call stories for all the prophets of the bible and it is very likely that for some the call came through a slow process of discovery over the years – with God persistently calling them to lead and act messengers to God’s people. For some prophets, however, we have quite dramatic stories passed down to us regarding a moment when God called them. Our scripture passage from Isaiah for today is an example of a dramatic call story, where Isaiah has a vision of God sitting on a heavenly throne, with the hem of God’s robe flowing down to fill the temple below and all around God are these multi-winged angelic creatures called

“Seraphs” flying above God with one saying “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of God’s glory.” Isaiah is overwhelmed by this vision and by the fact that he is even seeing it and confesses that as a sinful human being surely he should not be permitted to see this vision of holiness and live – and yet he indeed is seeing it. And if the drama wasn’t high enough, it increases as one of these Seraphs flies over to Isaiah with a “live coal” that had been burning on the altar and touches his mouth with it saying, “your guilt has departed and your sin blotted out.” It is very symbolic that the live coal touches Isaiah’s mouth as what happens next is God asks among the heavenly consort, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” God is looking for someone to go deliver a message to the people. Purified for this task, Isaiah says: “Here am I; send me!”

If Isaiah had even a hint of pride in being purified and called by God for a prophetic vocation, it was surely smothered almost instantly when he was told what it was that he was to say to the people: [SLIDE 13] 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' (Isaiah 6:9) In this enigmatic message that Isaiah is supposed to proclaim to the people, we encounter a common feature of the prophetic message that will reappear throughout this worship series and that common feature is that the prophet often speaks a difficult word, a word of “judgment.” Eugene Peterson paraphrases the message God gives Isaiah to say this way:

“Listen hard, but you aren’t going to get it;  
look hard, but you won’t catch on.’  
Make these people blockheads,  
with fingers in their ears and blindfolds on their eyes,  
So they won’t see a thing,  
won’t hear a word,  
So they won’t have a clue about what’s going on  
and, yes, so they won’t turn around and be made whole.”

Ouch. Wouldn't it have been better if God had told Isaiah to say, "Listen hard *so that you can hear what God is saying, so that you can catch on and so that you can change and be made whole!*"

Here it is helpful to remember that Isaiah, like all the other prophets we will look at, spoke in a particular time and place. Isaiah was an eight-century prophet whose place was in Jerusalem and he often was speaking to some of Judah's Kings and leaders – people with power and privilege whose choices were setting the city and its inhabitants on a destructive course. I don't know about you, but I detect in Isaiah's words a bit of the ironic aspect to the prophet's vocation – they are to declare God's desire for repentance and faithfulness, but at the same time, with brutal honesty and poetic flourish, they name the failures of the leaders and point out the utter stubbornness of those who have become blinded by power. It isn't hard for us even today to think of world leaders who are grasping on to power so tightly that they are willing to destroy anyone in their way that opposes them "until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate" (Isaiah 6:11). I think it is not hard to hear Isaiah's words of judgment as a kind of biting critique of corrupt, powerful leaders who refuse to listen no matter how loud God and God's people speak out against their actions. God's word of judgment spoken through Isaiah is the plain message that leaders that take such courses reap only one reward, and that is destruction.

The prophet's word of judgment is a troubling word, isn't it. As a church of imperfect people who are on a journey of learning as we try to be the people God has called us to be, we strive *not* to be a "judgmental" people. Being judgmental, after all, gets us into all sorts of trouble – it divides us, it causes conflict and hurt feelings, and often it can stem from a "holier than thou" attitude on behalf of the one doing the judging. So, what are we to do with this

common element of “judgment” in the prophets? While we will struggle with this throughout this worship series, I want to suggest that we would do well to live in the tension that prophetic judgment opens for us. Judgment is about naming what is not right in the world and in ourselves and surely, we *have* to be able to do that. But we also acknowledge that we need to name what is wrong with humility, knowing that we need to be the ones first to take the log out of our own eye before taking the spec out of our neighbor’s eye. Perhaps biblical prophecy is best approached then as a tool for self-examination before we use it to judge the world around us.

If a key feature of the prophet’s message is often a word of judgment, is that it? Is there no positive element? Indeed, there is a positive element – there is *hope*. [SLIDE 14] Prophets almost always follow their message of judgment with a message of hope. While actions have consequences and things can totally fall apart, they *can be put back together again* – there is hope. In God’s address to Isaiah, the hope is “small” and “muted,” but it is there. Did you catch it? In God’s address to Isaiah, he pictures the cities and the people as being like a “terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled,” and God calls the stump “the holy seed” – the potential for new growth. While such an image may seem like small consolation after the destruction wrought upon the land, it is a testament to something that God reinforces again and again throughout scripture, and that is that out of small, seemingly insignificant things, God’s can raise up new life, beauty, and real hope for the future.

So, we’ve had a whirlwind introduction to the prophets, the bible’s messengers of God. We’ve learned there are a lot of them and that they are quite diverse and that their tasks involved them in many creative forms of expression as they sought to communicate God’s judgment and hope to the people they addressed. What I want to leave us with today is a challenge as we lean into this worship series. [SLIDE 15] Over the next eleven weeks, consider first how we as a

community and you as a disciple of Jesus, might be called to prophetic ministry. How might God be calling you to speak God's word into the lives of those around you? Second, consider how God is calling us to view the world through the lens of judgment and hope. Can we view our own lives as well as the headlines and the activities of our own local communities in such a way as to *name the wrong* but also *imagine a better way*? Third, let us always consider how viewing our prophetic task through Jesus' life can show us how to embody prophetic ministry in our world today. The biblical prophets were flawed human beings like you and me. But Jesus said that his own life "fulfilled" their ministry, that it lived their vocation out to the fullest and so, as we seek to live lives that embody God's word for those around us, may we look to Jesus as our prophetic guide, so that we too might be holy seeds of God's hope for the future. May it be so. AMEN.