

January 30th, 2022

Jeremiah 1:4-10 “Are You a Prophet?”

I was talking to someone at a memorial service a couple of weeks ago who said that her family used to belong to a “holy rollin’ church.” I asked what she meant because I’m always curious about whether someone else’s definition of “holy rollin’” corresponds with mine. She said, “Well, when I was a little girl, my parents taught us that we had to sit still and be quiet in church. No running around. No causing a ruckus. No foolishness. Then we started going to this holy rollin’ church, and I was sitting there quietly like I had in our old church, but then people started getting up, dancing around the aisles, shouting and raising their hands. And I thought, ‘Wow! All the things I love to do! This is a great church!’ But then my parents told me that I still had to sit down and be quiet because only the adults could get up, run around and make a ruckus. I didn’t think that was very fair.”

I remember the first charismatic church I went to in high school. And, of course I was there because I was dating a girl who went to that church. I’ve got to say, I loved the music. Things were going along great and after about 20 minutes of non-stop singing I saw someone in the pews stand up and start to speak, but I couldn’t quite understand what he was saying. The music kept going, but the people stopped singing so that the only voice you could hear was the guy who was speaking. By then it was clear he wasn’t speaking English. I asked my girlfriend what language he was speaking and she said, “Tongues.” Okay. Never heard that one before. So I asked, “Do you understand what he’s saying?” She said, “Not yet” which confused me even more. Then as if on cue, the guy who was speaking in tongues sat down and someone else stood up and gave an interpretation. I said, “So are these two the only ones who understand this language?” She said, “Well, yeah ... this week but next week it might be someone else.” The whole experience was peculiar to me, but I didn’t think it was “weird.” In fact I went to other charismatic churches in Oregon, and I just thought, “Well, it’s different but I’m okay with it.” Then I moved to mid-Atlantic

Appalachia where I discovered what a *real* “Holy rollin’” church was all about. That’s when I learned, “It’s all fun and games ‘til the snakes come out.”

Now, to be fair and honest, I’ve never been to a snake-handling church when there were snakes present. And yes, you heard me right. There are charismatic churches in the Appalachians who take the last 11 verses of Mark’s gospel *very* seriously, especially verse 17 when Jesus tells his disciples, “And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name, they will cast out demons, they will speak in new tongues, they will pick up snakes in their hands.” Mind you, the oldest manuscripts of Mark do not contain these verses. Most scholars believe they were tacked on later which, of course, makes the snake-handling churches quite hostile to any kind of biblical scholarship.

My experience with snake handling churches have all been on Sunday *mornings*. Most of them save the snakes for mid-week services, or revival meetings or other special occasions. But even their average Sunday morning worship services make West-Coast “holy rollin’” churches look pretty dull by comparison. There are usually a *lot* of people dancing and speaking tongues, sometimes all at once. And every now and then someone gets “slain in the spirit” and just collapses on the floor. These are all manifestations of the spirit which are mostly listed in First Corinthians 12. The gift that fascinated me, though, was the gift of the “prophetic word.” When I was a kid I thought a prophet was someone predicted the future. After all, Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, so it makes sense that someone was telling the future back in the day, right? But as one charismatic minister once told me, “Prophecy is simply a word from God. It could be a word of encouragement. It could be a warning. It could even just be a challenge for the church to do better.” In some cases, especially in the New Testament, a word of prophesy provides an interpretation of past and present events, not just future events.

In the modern church, we've become pretty wary of prophets because we have this image in our minds of a guy who walks around in tattered clothes or robes carrying a sign with "Repent! The end is near!" scrawled on it. We've become suspicious of the truth of some of these prophecies and the prophets who deliver them. So we do what we typically do when we don't understand something. We invalidate the idea of prophecy completely and treat anyone who claims to speak prophetically like they don't know what they're talking about. But I think there is a valid understanding of prophecy and prophets that we need to explore and recover in the church.

The scripture Peggy read this morning is about God commissioning Jeremiah as a prophet in Israel. "The Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, 'I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you.'" But Jeremiah protested. He didn't think he was up to the job because he was too young and had no public speaking skills. But God assured him that he had known Jeremiah and loved him since he's been alive and will be with him throughout his ministry. What are these passages of scripture calling us to learn about prophesy? What can we take from them? I guess we should start at the beginning with the first obvious question: "What is prophesy?"

A prophesy is a message from God, and a prophet is the spokesperson who brings the message on behalf of God. You might say, "Well that sounds kind of like preaching." Good point. Biblically speaking, the words "prophesying" and "preaching" can mean the same thing and in many cases are interchangeable. But not all prophesy happens where the sermon is listed in the worship bulletin. But ... all preaching is supposed to be prophetic. It's an "authorized word from God." And since preaching is a reflection on Biblical texts, and we consider the Bible the "word of God" then yeah ... preaching can definitely be prophetic. I like that the Bible has some uncomfortable things to say prophetically speaking. Like I said a few weeks ago, "I didn't write the book, I'm just telling you what it says." So does that mean we have regular "prophesying" in the church? I sure hope so, because if we don't then

I'm not doing my job. Here's the thing though, I'm not supposed to be the only prophet here. Prophesying is not reserved for the designated preacher. It's the task of the church as a whole. Here's something else to consider – even though prophesying is the task of the church as a whole, this doesn't mean it's the task of every *individual* acting *individually*. Prophecy is the task of the church acting *collectively*. Together we are called to proclaim God's message to the world and bear the word of God to all. Remember that in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), our three sacraments – that is our most treasured practices – are the Lord's supper, Baptism and the Priesthood of all believers. We say “all means all” when it comes to the way we're supposed to welcome others, but in this case “all means all” applies to the priesthood of *all believers*. We are *all* called to be ambassadors for Christ, we have all been sent into the world that God loves to represent and promote Christ's values. We proclaim forgiveness, reconciliation, love and peace in all the places where we live, work and play. That is our collective mission, given to us at our baptism and reinforced every week when we come to the table for communion. Okay, that's fine, but how do we recognize those of us who God has commissioned to speak to others like Jeremiah? How do we identify those who offer a word of challenge or comfort or correction or commission? Here's four things to consider based on our scripture this week -

First of all, a prophet is appointed and equipped by God. A self-appointed prophet is a contradiction in terms. You can only speak on behalf of somebody else when that somebody else has authorized you to do so. Now this, of course, is not necessarily an easy thing to discern, because self-appointed prophets almost always claim that they've been appointed by God. So how do *we* know? In order for a prophet to be appointed by God, they'll need to be a prayerful person; someone who spends time contemplating the scriptures and listening openly to God. And secondly, other wise and prayerful people need to recognize and affirm their gift. And to complicate matters, the powerful people and designated leaders of the world might *not* recognize and affirm the prophetic gift, because they're often the ones who the prophet has to

challenge on God's behalf! As I've said before, sometimes the people who don't like you are just as important as the ones who do.

Secondly, the true prophet is usually reluctant like Jeremiah or even Moses. Jeremiah and Moses both protested and tried to persuade God that they weren't the right people for the job. Most self-appointed prophets will tell you they're the real deal and you ought to listen to them. The true prophet isn't always looking for opportunities. In fact, the true prophet might not want to even *answer* the call because they may not agree with what God has called them to do. Think about Jonah. He hated the Ninevites, but God called him to go deliver a prophetic word to them. Jonah even tried to run and hide, but as the old gospel song goes, "There's no hiding place down here, there's no hiding place."

Thirdly, the true prophet doesn't just denounce and oppose, but informs, encourages, and builds up. God told Jeremiah, "I appoint you to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Some people are more than happy to be the naysaying prophet. You want me to tell folks what's wrong with them? "Here I am Lord, send me!" True prophets are constructive. Sometimes they *are* called to knock things down, but they're also called to build things up. God's challenge to us is always a call to something good and true and worthy. It's not just all about being a naysayer. For every warning to "turn away" there has to be an invitation to "come to."

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, true prophets are not motivated or characterized by resentment or contempt for the community they're addressing. They are motivated by love. In the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, "If I speak in words of prophecy, but do not have love, I am nothing." So ultimately, not only is it those who love patiently, kindly, gently and humbly who we will look to and trust to be bearers of the word of God, but it is also those who truly love that are likely to be bearers of the Word. Even when they can't imagine themselves as prophets. Even when they aren't even conscious of any special calling to be a prophet. Love and truth go hand in hand. True

prophecy is inseparable from love, and while prophecy will pass away, love remains. And this, I trust, is a prophetic word of the Lord.