

**“What’s With Those Prophets?”**  
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**June 27, 2010**  
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This question, “What’s with those prophets?” was on Becky Cantor’s list of suggested sermon titles. We often hear of the “major” and “minor” prophets in categorizing certain books in the Hebrew Bible. But this question is larger than these canonical books. My seminary professor, Dr. James Sanders, in his book *Torah and Canon*, says that “the prophet in ancient Israel was a spokesperson for both God and God’s people, an emissary or messenger from the divine court to the human marketplace, and from the marketplace to the heavenly presence” (p.54). It’s often thought that prophets are those who “foretell the future.” But this was not the role of the Hebrew prophets. The Greek word for prophet is *pro-phetes* which means “speaker for.” The task of the prophet was to relate faith and history from God’s perspective, drawing from the past, critiquing the present, and suggesting what might be some “natural consequences” to come. All of history, past, present, and future, was God’s history, and faith lay in understanding that Yahweh God was the one who held the possibilities for creation’s future.

In the Hebrews’ history there are two broad categories of prophets: Sanders calls the first “prophets of ecstasy and spirit,” and the second “prophets of agony and word.” But before either of these two groups of prophets there were the men and women in the very early history of Israel like Moses, Miriam, Aaron, and Deborah; who, as Sanders puts it, “stood in the breach at the turning points of Israel’s history” (p.61). Their responses to Yahweh’s call brought into being the history of the nation of Israel. They also were mediators of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel and thus they did the work of prophets. They, too, are sometimes referred to as “prophets” in the Hebrew Bible and certainly within the Jewish interpretations that followed the Hebrew scriptures.

The prophets of “ecstasy and spirit” were the early prophets we read of in books such as I Kings and Samuel and in today’s text. Some were members of guilds of prophets who wandered the country speaking from states of frenzy. Others were those peculiar people who stood apart from both the court and the people and mediated the word of God, calling Israel to be more than ordinary: to be people of the covenant. Elijah and Elisha were in this group.

The classical prophets, or as Sanders would say, prophets of “agony and word” came later in Israel’s history, roughly from 750 B.C. to 540 B.C. They came after the monarchy was fully established and their words were hardly heard and rarely heeded in their own time. The court had its own prophets who generally knew what the kings wanted to hear and reported the desired tidings back to the king, thus remaining in the king’s good graces. But the prophets of “agony and word” heeded a higher calling and their “words” were based on Yahweh’s “word” which was the final word! Therefore, these prophets lived lives of agony, as they were destined to say words people didn’t

want to hear and to perceive the consequences for a nation who had forgotten to whom they belonged.

These prophets are noted for some pretty bizarre teaching demonstrations. Jeremiah puts on the yoke of an oxen and carries it around telling the people that Yahweh wants Israel to submit to Babylon like an oxen submits to a heavy yoke around his neck. Jeremiah breaks a pot into pieces (another striking visual aid) to demonstrate that Israel would be broken because of unfaithfulness. (Remember that pots were more valuable back then; they didn't have the "made in China" label.) The prophet Amos sings a dirge for Israel, a funeral dirge. All their prophetic words reflected what they observed around them.

In today's Hebrew text Elisha, who is destined to assume the role of Elijah, follows him to the end. He asks for a double portion, which means the inheritance of the first-born son. Elijah doesn't seem to be too affirming of the one who is to carry his work into the future. But the mantle becomes the symbol of God's blessing this transference of one prophet's work to the next. It is the outward and visible sign of God's intention for Elisha.

All these great prophets stood over and against culture, community, and nation. Their only way to honor the boundaries was to be set apart so that they could be spokespeople for God *to* God's people and to speak *for* God's people to God. In order not to be compromised they could not accept money from lobbyists. They were lonely truth-tellers. They were not court appointees but rather God's annointees. Their prophetic words had little to do with the topics that people argue the most about today. They were most concerned with the huge divide between rich and poor, the oppressed and oppressor; they were concerned about orphans and widows, "the least of these," the forgotten and ignored. They kept calling people to pay attention to what God thought was important.

Our text from Luke's gospel places Jesus in this same prophetic role. He sets his face towards Jerusalem. He is single-minded in his mission. Now there is no turning back. He refuses acts of violence that James and John suggest, such as bringing down fire. He rebukes them: "What *were* they thinking?" When someone offers to follow him, Jesus points out that prophets are homeless people with nowhere to lay their heads. When Jesus invites others to be part of his work, to "follow him," it becomes clear that lengthy funerals and long goodbyes suggest a lack of determination on the part of the prospective disciples. Jesus' prophetic message is that we give our whole selves to the work of God; we turn away from the things that compromise our lives. Our priorities are to be God's priorities. Our work is to be God's work. Our passions are to be God's passions. Human life is to be in the service of God's mission. Discipleship is a single-mindedness of purpose that is prompted by God's love for humanity and all the world.

Now we learn in seminary that ordained clergy are to serve as prophets, priests, and pastors. We are to have the courage to speak God's word even when the truth is hard to tell, we are to perform the sacraments that bring the presence of God near to us, and we are to show the pastoral love of God for the world. These are what we strive for and these are what we always fall short of. These are really the mission of everyone in the church.

It occurred to me that being a prophet is kind of like being a parent of a teenager. As a parent, one often states the obvious along with the natural consequences that come as a result of certain behaviors, and then suggest directly or indirectly an appropriate course of action, all the while knowing that the likelihood of the teenager taking one's suggestion is pretty unlikely. But there's another important prophetic word that prophets in biblical times offered and parents today can repeat, and that word is that after judgment, after natural consequences, after forgetfulness and bad behavior, God's word is a word of mercy, grace, redemption, and transformation. As is often the case with teenagers, sometimes it takes something huge to get our attention, and only then does real transformation happen. The prophetic last word is not judgment but salvation; it is not death but life; it is not life as it was before but life of a new creation.

So "what's with those prophets?" They were and are men and women who "took up the mantle" and who through word and deed and single-mindedness of purpose gave birth to creative transformation--not just a little reformation but real transformation. To the best of our abilities, we are called to take up our mantle as people of God and to do the same. May we do so, with the help of God. AMEN.