

**THE THREAT OF PROPHETIC PREACHING**  
**Year C, 4 Epiphany, January 28, 2007 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

“Lord Jesus, open our ears that we might hear your words, open our eyes that we might see your way, open our hearts that we might act in love as you would have us do. Amen.”

Who in their right mind would what do to be a prophet? Do we have any volunteers this morning? Before we hasten to step up, let’s consider what life for those called by God is like. Think about Jeremiah this morning. God said that he was known since he was in the womb. Okay ... no problem there. A prophet will speak the word of God ... okay ... what’s the catch? Ah, God says that the prophet will meet all kinds of opposition! Whoa! What’s this all about? If we look at the lives of the prophets, they are beaten, rejected, arrested, imprisoned and killed! This is not exactly an inviting scenario, is it? What is the importance of a prophet?

Flannery O’Connor wrote a short story called “Revelation.” In it, we see the main character, Ruby, a smug and self-satisfied woman sitting in a doctor’s office. She evaluates all the people in the room and judges herself superior to anyone. She especially takes an immediate dislike to an unkempt, wary teenager, Mary Grace, sitting across from her. Ruby thinks how she would never allow a child of hers to become what this wretched creature has devolved into. To Ruby, Mary Grace is untrained, ignorant, not groomed, not polite and essential worthless.

Without warning, Mary Grace fixes her stare on Ruby who’s chatting away about her superiority over others. Suddenly, the girl hurls a book across the room and cold cocks Ruby. The woman falls to the floor and the teenager jumps on top of her. Mary Grace hisses at ruby, “Go back to hell where you came from you old wart hog!” Wow! Clearly this is a shock, unexpected and unacceptable behavior ... or is it?

O’Connor goes on in the story to say that this is a moment of transformation for Ruby. It is from here that her redemption, repentance and a heavenly vision emerge! Mary Grace is a prophet. She gets Ruby’s attention. Revelation is when we’re hit up side of the head! Has this ever happened to us? Better yet, has this ever happened on Sunday? Have we been hit in the head with a book?

Look out folks! Here comes Jesus and he’s going to be a prophet, he’s going to hit us side of the head! Luke continues the story of Jesus’ visit to Nazareth this morning. He preaches in his home synagogue. Can’t you just see the people tittering on the return of the local boy? But ... what happens? First there is astonishment, and then there is perplexity, finally rejection that turns to anger. The hometown folks turn on Jesus. Why? Well, it doesn’t help that Jesus makes reference to others, those not part of their community as more deserving of miracle than them! Jesus keeps talking about ministry to others ... what is this all about?

The reality we are confronted with is that prophets are not easily received. Yes, they are chosen by God to speak God’s words ... but those words are often harsh and condemning. Prophets like Jeremiah are told that they will face opposition, that they will not be readily received. We are seeing the same thing here with Jesus. But this is the mission of prophets. They are called to speak on God’s behalf and to call the people back to the place that God wants them to be in ... not where they are now!

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Jesus' first sermon blows people out of the water. What we need to understand is that the fate of the people in Nazareth can be our fate as well. What Luke presents us with this morning is the model of Jesus', and the early Church's, ministry. First, Jesus will place emphasis on ministry to outsiders, outcasts, those not in our circles right now. Next, resistance and opposition will meet Jesus. Then the people will reject Jesus. What I find most disturbing, however, is the last sentence ... Jesus will go elsewhere. Luke was writing his Gospel for the Gentiles, for those who were not part of Israel. The evangelist is taking the word of God to others since they had rejecting Jesus.

Jesus brings God's truth ... but we don't want to hear it. What do we want? We want comfortable words, acceptance and affirmation of our lifestyles and positions. We try to make the Gospel fit where we are now ... just look at those who proclaim a Gospel of success, or a Gospel that easily excludes others. This is not what God wants. When the prophets confront us ... they aren't popular because they are calling for something different from what we are and what we are doing.

God sends the prophets to say hard things. They come to call us back to God. They come to challenge us. God demands that we change our lives, and we resist. It's no wonder that people hesitate when God calls them to be prophets! This is not an easy job! But again, look at that last sentence ... if we reject the prophets, if we ignore Jesus, the promise of God will go elsewhere! Is that what we want ... to say to Jesus, we won't do it your way ... just go away? If we fail to take Jesus seriously, we risk losing life and more!

What kind of preachers do we want? This is a tough question for clergy. I remember my homiletics professor telling us that we had to connect with the people and the Gospel. We wrestle with wanting to be accepted and heard. We resort to strokes, comfortable words and sentimental stories to soften the message. It's hard to preach in a prophetic way. It's risky and may cost us!

But the model we have from Jesus for reaching is different from the very beginning. He challenges us! Jesus points us to a different place and way. He pushes us out of our comfort zones and status quo towards something greater. Jesus presses us to become what God wants ... and that often does not coincide with who we are now. He presses us to see the world differently, through God's eyes.

One way that this became clearer to me was at a conference last year. A vestry member and I went to St. Bartholomew's in New York City last year. Here was a huge city parish that nearly closed their doors. They were on the verge of selling the building to become a historic museum rather than a Church! The one phrase that struck me was the rector's repeatedly saying, "If we're not growing, we're dying." This soon became the measure for which everything was put up against. Does this help us to grow in faith? Does this help us to grow membership? If not, then we have to do something else. This challenge was prophetic in its own way ... and when it became embraced, many good things began to happen in the parish. St. Bart's is now a dynamic, growing place!

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Jesus does the same thing to us. Are we growing? If not, there is something different needed. What's Jesus' motivation? He's not operating out of meanness, but seeks to save us. Jesus is moved by the nature of divine love, to save us! God will seek to save us, especially from ourselves! Jesus cares enough to confront us. The strong words he uses are meant to turn us towards life, the promises that God holds out to us, and a center grounded deeply in faith.

What Jesus found in Nazareth was a serious problem. The people there thought they had an exclusive claim on God. They had determined that they knew everything that God wanted. But no one has an exclusive claim on Jesus or God. As a matter of fact, it was the other way around ... God has an exclusive claim on us! Jesus ran straight into the small town mentality. This is where we care only about ourselves. It results in our closing down our world to others and being too much like Ruby ... smug and self-satisfied. Jesus comes into the world to disrupt our self-centeredness and demand that we care more about others. This is the inclusiveness of God.

What we see in Jesus is the nature of God that cares not only about us, but about others as well. In Jesus we see the call to reach out to others. We can start by asking ourselves who's not here. God demands that we care about the poor ... especially our brothers and sisters in Camden ... about strangers, especially immigrants, about those we make war on, such as the Iraqis. Jesus demands that we be concerned about the sick, the homeless, the gay and lesbians, the mentally disabled and more.

What is going to take to get our attention? Where's Grace church with God. If we're not growing, we're dying. If we're not reaching out to others, we are losing. I've seen too much of what is happening to other churches in our convocation that fail to respond to Jesus' words. We have closed Church of Our Savior and Trinity, Delair. We have part-time ministries at churches that use to be full-time. We have churches that only have supply clergy. Too often, these congregations resisted the call to be what God wanted. What is it in us that we are willing to let this happen ... and think we are immune from a similar fate.

Where is the Church growing? Where are people who want God at the center of their lives, not the edge? We will find growing churches where the challenges and changes that Jesus puts before us are being embraced and acted upon. Churches that are growing reach out to others, they open the doors, they insist that this place is not just for us but also for all. The places that are growing are those who have been hit up side the head ... and are making the changes to live differently!

We must understand that the prophet's words are not just hard, but are words of life. Like Jesus, they bring us faith, hope and love! We would do well to ask ourselves where Grace Church is headed. Are we doing what God wants? Are we living into Jesus' call to bring grace to all people, to make a difference in our lives and the lives of others? Are we following Jesus' model by making a deliberate choice to be a community of action, or are we just labels?

The challenge for us is to be Jesus' prophetic community. It's not easy but it makes a world of difference. Let's not let Jesus walk out of our lives. Let's make a difference in his name. Lord, please hit us up side of the head with your book!

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