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First Lutheran Church
Prophetic Words of the Living God
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Grace and peace in the name of God our loving Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

When you think of a prophet what image comes to mind?

Someone angry at people and telling them to change their ways? Some guy with a white beard from an ancient time? Someone like a sorcerer predicting the future? Maybe a man or woman from more recent times who called their communities to align more closely with God's values—like Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks or Nelson Mandela.

Maybe we think of music about prophets, like Simon and Garfunkel singing the “Words of the Prophets are written on the Subway walls and tenement halls” or Bob Marley singing “How Long will they kill our prophets while we stand aside and look”.

When I was in Bible School in Seattle, I read two books about prophets that influenced how I understood prophecy and opened up how I saw prophecy in the world around me. Abraham Heschel in his book Prophets I and Prophets II, emphasized how prophets spoke with God's voice because they saw the world through God's eyes. They sensed God's heart, his joy and his heartbreak. They love people so much and were also deeply disappointed in their sin and failures, just like God experiences.

The book The Prophetic Imagination by Walter Brueggemann painted a line of biblical prophets going back to Moses, and a “prophetic imagination” that was always active as an alternative voice to the dominant cultural power of the time. This dominant “Religion of Empire” could also be called the religion of the status quo. These are the voices in the world that tells us everything is going fine. That “this is the best of all possible worlds”. We need to just keep doing what we are doing because what we are doing is the best. The prophetic imagination and the voices of prophets use the power and wisdom of time and God’s big picture to help people caught up in this triumphant idea about their culture. If you look at prophet’s words there is a consistent message that things will change, using reminders that the past was different and the future will be different than the current experience. It reminds them to honor what has come before and not dismiss it as more primitive and to not assume what is happening today will be the same forever. We are called into that same prophetic message when the world seems stuck or decides it has things figured out. Prophets remind people that God is alive and powerful in situations where many in the dominant culture want to deny that.

Our texts today talk about what it means to be a prophet and the stakes of being called into this role. Moses in Deuteronomy is wondering how his ministry, as a prophet go between for God and the Israelites will continue after he is gone. God assures Moses that a prophet will be raised up from among the people. This sets up a prophetic line as an office and institution rather than through an individual’s experience. And invites Moses to believe in a Prophetic Imagination that will lift up new voices to continue the liberation God began through Moses freeing of the Israelites from the bondage of the Egyptian Empire.

But being a prophet or claiming to be a prophet holds risks. God in Deuteronomy says, “Any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die” (Deut 18:20).

God takes this very seriously. In fact, this is the meaning behind the Third Commandment to not take the Lord's name in vain. We often think of this as using a term for God outside of a religious context, as a swear word. But God is more concerned with people who claim to be speaking in God's name, who are using claims of God or prophecy in order to gain money, power or influence. God can't stand charlatans who behave like this, because it never ends well. The False Prophets of the Old Testament are usually easy to pick out. They are the ones that say things won't change and that the current leaders are the greatest, and they claim that this is what God believes too. People that hear their words become confused about who God is and what God cares about because of these people. Often people that believe they are speaking in God's name don't listen to others who are speaking for God and lead people astray...or away from the real messages of God for all people.

When Psalm 111 states that the “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” it is talking about how humans are to respect the power of God in our lives and to respect the boundaries of divinity and humanity. When humans begin to pretend to be God, it doesn't respect God or God's message. When we have that type of respect for God, that is what makes us God-fearing people. But at the same time when people are filled with the Holy Spirit they live into the prophetic voice and know they are speaking for God and with God, they are

not afraid. They have a confidence that God has told them to speak or that the Holy Spirit is giving them the words.

The prophetic voice reminds institutions like the church that God is alive and still speaking. And the church is also called to discern whether a prophetic voice is in line with God's teaching and values.

When Jesus begins his ministry at a synagogue at Capernaum, he begins teaching with authority. Which means he begins speaking for God and as God, without fear. He is interrupted by a man with an unclean spirit, who recognizes him and says, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are the Holy One of God."

The people around him may not understand who Jesus is yet, but the demon inside this man does. The spiritual world is ahead of the human world here. God needs to slow these demonic spirits down and tells them to be silent. The term the demon uses to "out" Jesus in the synagogue, calling him the "Holy One of God" is a term that has roots in the ministry of another biblical prophet named Elisha who had been called to "restore the correct boundary between the demonic realm of death and the world of life created by God" (The Jewish Annotated New Testament 61).

There is a whole spiritual battle going on behind the scenes and Jesus seems intent on keeping it under wraps..for now. He almost seems to want humans to figure it out for themselves, based on what Jesus does and says, rather than hear who he is from the spiritual realm. What Jesus does in the world, through the exorcism of unclean spirits, healing, and feeding those in need is part of a spiritual battle lived out in real time and real people's lives. The demonic realm

is defined by death and despair. The realm of Jesus, and the realm of the Spirit that inspires prophetic voices is a realm that feeds people love, light and life.

The people around Jesus in the synagogue marvel at what they have seen. They wonder, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority!" And it is reported that "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee" (Mark 1: 27-28). They recognize that Jesus is preparing to turn the tide of a spiritual battle and that God is loose in the world, freeing those that are bound by death and despair. This is a continuation of the prophetic voice and the prophetic office held by Moses and Elisha and Isaiah and many others... but it is also something new. Jesus has authority that has never been seen before. He is God among us. He has no fear of his Word not being from God, and that makes those that want to keep the religious status quo nervous. Those like the scribes in the synagogue, that would rather God be contained within what has already been said and written, are just as afraid as the demons, who say, "What do you want with us Jesus of Nazareth, have you come to destroy us?"

But as Jesus is at work in the world, as He gets his hands dirtier and dirtier in the human lives around him, he gets us cleaner and cleaner...healed, fed, forgiven. But the writing was on the walls for those who feared him, and feared that he would change everything. The religious authorities liked the way things were and they saw Jesus as a threat to their power.

But Jesus continued to apply his understanding of God to his context and the communities he was a part of. His God had a pulse and a heart for all of those people. We are called to do the same. This is the line we are a part of. Light givers, love givers, life givers in the face of darkness, despair, and death we

proclaim Jesus, a savior for us and for all, who changed everything for each of us and the whole world.

May the peace that passes all understanding keep your heart and mind in Christ Jesus our Lord!