

SEPTEMBER 2001

Speaking of prophets - Part 1

New Bible study series

Some journals, like the one from Wall Street, speak of profits; the Bible speaks of prophets of the other kind, the ones who do their speaking for God.

Prophet statement

Micah

Beginning this month we will be speaking of prophets, not the money kind of profits we hope to realize from investments, but the message kind of prophets who realized that people needed to hear a word from God.

Our first prophet is Micah, whose prophet statement is one we know by heart. Micah lived in the eighth century before Christ. He was known as "Micah of Moresheth" and not "Micah Son-of-Somebody," which may mean he was less important as a family member than he was as a leader in his village. If he had been a Presbyterian, Micah might have been ordained an elder in the church; if he had been a politician he might have been elected mayor of the town; because he was a prophet he was a chosen man of God.

**We prefer pleasant preaching
by moderate ministers
who assure us all is well with us**

If we close our eyes and open our imagination we can see Micah now howling his way through the village streets. He is not wearing the bathrobe we put on actors for a church school pageant; in fact, he is barefoot and is clothed in very little at all! "I will go barefoot and naked," he has told the people. "I will make lamentation like jackals, and mourning like the ostriches" ([1:8](#)). Micah has also shaved his head, and he is absolutely covered with dirt! "Make yourselves bald as an eagle," he has said ([1:16](#)), "roll yourselves in the dust" ([1:10](#)). What is most compelling about this man, though, is his energy. "I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" ([3:8](#)).

Why all the fuss? we ask.

Because Israel's enemy, Assyria, is headed south; Samaria has fallen, and Jerusalem may be next. Although Moresheth lies south of the city, the local military has already established a garrison there, evicting civilians from their property. "You rise up against my people as an enemy," the prophet cries. "The women of my people you drive out from their pleasant homes" ([2:8-9](#)). Shopkeepers have started overcharging their customers. "Can I tolerate wicked scales

and a bag of dishonest weights?" Micah asks (6:11). Even the courts are corrupt. "The official and the judge ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire" (7:3). Not only that, in Jerusalem "its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money, yet they lean upon the Lord and say, "Surely the Lord is with us! No harm can come upon us" (3:11).

When Micah preaches against the immorality of the times and about God's anger, the people protest, "One should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us" (2:6).

What do they want to hear? we ask.

"If someone were to go about . . . saying, *I will preach to you of wine and strong drink,' such a one would be the preacher for this people!" Micah replies (2:11).

We nod in agreement, for we too prefer pleasant preaching by moderate ministers, clean, wearing socks and shoes, and fully clothed, who assure us that all is well with us even if poverty, violence, hunger and discrimination can be found within the borders of our town. We are proud to go to a church that does religion right.

Micah shakes his bald head and the dust from his feet and speaks the prophet statement we know by heart:

"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:8).

The Word of the Lord? we ask.

OCTOBER 2001

Speaking of prophets - Part 2

Making a prophet

Jonah

Profits and prophets

Some journals, like the one from Wall Street, speak of profits; the Bible speaks of prophets of the other kind, the ones who do their speaking for God.

Close your eyes and open your imagination, and see with me a whimpering wreck of an angry man, holding his sunburnt head in his hands and crying, "It is better for me to die than to live!" (Jonah 4:3)

Who's that over there? we ask. The prophet Jonah, we're told.

What's the matter with him? They have him on suicide watch; he wants to die.

Will God have a hard time making a prophet of you?

As if echoing this thought, the whimpering wreck cries out again, "It is better for me to die than to live!" (4:8). We ask more questions of our imaginary guide and the story comes out:

About six days ago the word of the Lord came to Jonah: "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me" (1:2). Assyria, with its capital city, Nineveh, was a longtime enemy of Jonah's people; Israel's northern kingdom had fallen to Assyria in 721 BC. But even though Jonah agreed with the Lord about Nineveh's wickedness he fled the other way, "down to Joppa," to take a ship to Tarshish (1:3).

But when it comes to making a prophet, the Lord is persistent. First God hurled a great wind, scaring the ship's sailors into throwing Jonah overboard; then God sent a great fish to rescue Jonah from drowning in the deep. Jonah stayed in the belly of the fish three days and nights, so he never knew the sailors suddenly started worshiping the God of Israel. As Jonah went "down to Joppa" and down into the ship, down into the belly of the fish, and down into the heart of the sea, up on deck the heathen sailors lifted up sacrifices to the Lord!

So God made a prophet of Jonah after all? we ask.

Not yet. Jonah still had to go to Nineveh, a city so great that it took three days to cross. He walked in for just one day and then barely uttered five words in Hebrew, eight in translation: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4); then he headed east of the city to watch Nineveh's downfall.

But when the king of Nineveh heard Jonah's prophecy, he decreed that everybody, great and small, should put on sackcloth, fast and pray. *Everybody?* we ask. Everybody; even the animals! So God's mind changed about overthrowing Nineveh. In vain Jonah watched in the

hot sun, but nothing happened. Nineveh survived. That's why Jonah is angry enough to die.

"O Lord!" we hear Jonah pray. "That is why I fled to Tarshish . . . for I know that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. . . . It is better for me to die than to live" (4:2-3).

Just because God forgave his enemy, that wretched man over there wants to die? we ask. *Ironic, isn't it?* asks our guide. Jonah's story is about many "great" things--great wind, great fear, great joy, great fish, great city, Ninevites great and small. But in the end Jonah learns the greatest thing of all is the inclusive love of God. It is time for us to celebrate World Communion Sunday. We need to close our imagination and open our pocketbooks for the annual Peacemaking Offering of the church, our witness to God's compassion for all nations great and small. It's time to call ourselves to repentance for our prejudice and penchant for revenge. It's time for us to remember the great, *great* love of God. God had a hard time making a prophet of Jonah. Will God have this hard a time making a prophet of you?

NOVEMBER 2001

Speaking of prophets – Part 3

Prophet and loss

Jeremiah

Prophets and profits

When we look at our finances and speak of profits, we speak of gain, not loss. But when we speak of God's prophets, we often speak of more loss than gain.

The prophet Jeremiah lost everything.

If we close our eyes and open our imagination we can see him in the streets of Jerusalem now, weeping.

Although he lived 600 years before Christ, seen like this in his sorrow,

Jeremiah looks as grief-stricken as people we know today--the parents whose baby died of SIDS, the man whose partner died of AIDS, the couple whose marriage died of whatever it is marriages die of--people suffering great loss, even loss of faith in the mercy of God.

**Tell those who weep they can never lose everything.
God's new covenant is written on their hearts.**

The prophet cries, "For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt. . . . Is there no balm in Gilead? . . . O that my head were a spring of water . . . so that I might weep day and night" (Jeremiah 8:21-9:1).

Along the same street we see thousands of people moving east toward exile in Babylon, people who have lost a war, a homeland, and their hope.

It's not as if Jeremiah hadn't warned them! For 40 years, through the reigns of four kings, he begged the people to renew their covenant with God. "O Jerusalem, wash your heart clean of wickedness. . . . Your ways and your doings have brought this upon you. . . . It has reached your very heart" (4:14; 18). "Oh, the walls of my heart!" he added. "I cannot keep silent; for I hear . . . the alarm of war" (4:19).

Through these years Jeremiah has not kept silent. "If I say, 'I will not mention [God], or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (20:9). Master of the sermon illustration, Jeremiah held up a moldy loincloth before the people, saying, "Thus says the Lord: Just so I will ruin the pride of Judah" (13:9). He smashed a pot saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: So will I break this people . . . as one breaks a potter's vessel" (19:11). He pointed to a basket of bad figs saying, "So will I treat . . . the remnant of Jerusalem" (24:8). He even wore an ox yoke in the presence of the king of Judah, saying, "Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon . . . and live" (27:12).

There was war between the kings, Jeremiah said, because the people were not at peace with God. "How can you say, 'We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us.' . . . The wise shall be . . . dismayed and taken; since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what wisdom is in them?" (8:8-9).

The old covenant was broken; the prophet is brokenhearted now, too, as he watches his people go into exile. But then, even in his anguish, the word of the Lord comes to him again: "The days are surely coming

. . . when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" (31: 31-33).

With this promise Jeremiah knows he hasn't lost everything after all. God will make a new covenant for a new day, 600 years away. In the midst of his lamentations we might even hear the prophet begin to sing: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23).

We must now open our eyes and our mouths; we must not keep silent, we must speak of the new covenant in Christ. Tell those who weep they can never lose everything, especially their faith in the mercy of God. God's new covenant is written on their hearts.

DECEMBER 2001

Speaking of prophets- Part 4

Prophet incentive

Isaiah of Jerusalem

Profits and prophets

Some journals, like the one from Wall Street, speak of profits; the Bible speaks of prophets of the other kind, the ones who do their speaking for God.

It is night. Yet there stands the prophet, alone in the Jerusalem Temple, singing: "Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard" (Isaiah 5:1).

Isaiah is singing in the Lord's house because this is where he once heard angels sing.

**The night no longer seems dark to us now.
It is Advent, the time to watch for the light of
God's Son.**

It was in the year King Uzziah died. The Temple was filled with the smoke of sacrifice and suddenly Isaiah heard seraphim: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts," they sang (6:3). Then, in a sound that shook the Temple, Isaiah heard the voice of God: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Although his lips now seemed to burn with fire, Isaiah sang to God, "Here am I; send me!" (6:8-9).

In that day Isaiah became a prophet with "incentive," from the Latin *incentivus*, meaning "striking up or leading a melody." The words of his songs are in the Scriptures; Presbyterians sing them to this day: "Holy, holy, holy!" (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #138*); "Here I am, Lord . . . I have heard you calling in the night" (** (PH #525).

If we close our eyes and open our imaginations, we can see ourselves in the Temple now, members of a church choir come to hear Isaiah's story and to sing his songs. In the dark we can share his hope.

Isaiah tells us that after King Uzziah died, Judah's new king, Ahaz, also looked for hope. Threatened by war from all sides, Ahaz needed a sign. "The Lord himself will give you a sign," Isaiah said. "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel" (7:14).

Our choir knows Emmanuel (later spelled with a Latin "E" and meaning "God is with us") would be Jesus Christ. And so, we begin to

sing:

"O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!" (PH #9**)

The musical notes echo in the great room as Isaiah continues: "For a child has been born for us, . . . he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6).

We launch into the magnificent chorus from Handel's Messiah:

"Foouoorrrrr . . . unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given! And the government shall be upon his shou-ou-ou-ou-ou-oulders!"

Wiping away a tear of joy, Isaiah continues: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. . . . The wolf shall live with the lamb . . . the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them" (11:1, 6).

The vast hall is hushed. Then softly we sing:

"Lo, how a rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung, of Jesse's lineage coming, by faithful prophets sung. . . . Isaiah 'twas foretold it, the rose I have in mind, with Mary we beheld it, the virgin mother kind" (PH #48*).

"Watchman, what of the night?" Isaiah asks. "Morning comes, and also the night" (21:11-12 RSV). And we respond: "Watchman, tell us of the night, for the morning seems to dawn. Traveler, darkness takes its flight, doubt and terror are withdrawn. Watchman, let your wanderings cease; hasten to your quiet home. Traveler, lo, the Prince of Peace, lo, the Son of God is come!" (PH #20*).

We leave the Temple following the prophet, he who "led the melody." The night no longer seems dark to us now. It is Advent, the time to watch for the light of God's Son. We have hope. With Isaiah we have heard the angels sing.

Footnotes

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