

## Joining the Prophets

Baruch 5:1-9  
Philippians 1:3-11  
Luke 3:1-6  
Canticle 4 and 16  
Psalm 126

Have you ever been on a long road trip: long enough to take you on many types of roadways, across previously unseen country? I grew up on the West Coast where the spaces between destinations are vast. My family had a camper that fit onto the back of our pickup truck, and I had a father who loved to explore. My childhood was filled with crazy road trips and then I went on to raise my daughters with those same types of adventures. One of our favorite things is noticing road signs. Most of us grew up without the benefit of digital technology and mapping software. Our road trips were planned on actual paper maps, and we lived by the road signs. Not only do the signs tell you the name of the street or highway you're on, but they also tell you how far to the next destination and, if you find yourself going the wrong direction, they tell you where the next interchange is so you can exit and change course. As a kid, I loved counting down the miles on the road signs because it kept me hopeful of the end of the driving part of the trip so the real adventuring could begin. As an adult, living in the Rocky Mountains, I enjoyed the signs for their irony. For instance, the county road on which I lived had a sign with a squiggly line saying "winding road" on it. It seemed like an understatement, also true of every other road in the county, and equally a commentary on my life. Road signs, either helpful or ironic, are useful tools to help us determine where we are, where we've come from, and which direction we want to be traveling.

Today our readings direct us to the voice of the prophets. Prophets are those who speak for God and interpret God's will for the people. We tend to think of prophets and prophecy as an almost magical gift of insight into and speaking about the unknown future. There certainly is an element of that within the Biblical prophets, but most of the time their

words weren't uncovering mysteries as much as simply speaking the truth. In general, prophets are people who call for repentance, warn of retribution, and foretell the Messiah's salvation. None of those messages should be surprising. But the message of the prophets is noteworthy because we humans are not great at being honest with ourselves. We create mythologies around our behavior and priorities that keep us from evaluating ourselves candidly. Prophets tend to be disruptive because they interfere with the narratives that make us comfortable. They challenge the status quo. They realign the stories the people tell about themselves with the story of God. They proclaim God's priorities to people who have forgotten that God is still present and working. They tell us to look past our current moment and give us an imagination for what is to come. Like road signs, they orient us to the road we are on and remind us of where we are headed. The voice of the prophet doesn't have to be a previously unknown message from God to be powerful, inspired, or profound. The Old Testament prophets may have been revealing new truths, but since Jesus came, we are now all invited alongside these saints into a prophetic role.

One of the best things about reading the different gospel accounts from the various authors is that they all have different and unique perspectives and goals for their writing. Luke was a physician. As a doctor, he was very interested in people as contextualized individuals, particularly women, outcasts, and gentiles. He noticed and highlighted the social structures the people of his day took for granted. For that reason, it is exciting to see these accounts through his eyes. Today's story underscores his particular interest. He begins his story of John the Baptist by juxtaposing two very different realities. He starts by listing the emperor, governor, tetrarchs, and high priests...all powerful, prestigious, wealthy men of the city. Then he introduces us to John, a man who heard God's word in the wilderness. Rather than taking his message to the city center and the temple, John preached repentance in the Jordan River valley. John was a nobody, spreading his

message from nowhere, easy to overlook, except that it was God's Words he was prophetically speaking. And God's words, ignited by God's Spirit, can reach the highest levels of humanity from the most obscure voices.

Today's examples of prophetic messages, foretelling the coming Messiah, offer us a glimpse into both the comfort and the corrective impact of prophecy. Baruch and the Psalmist recount the bitterness of the people's past, while offering hope for the future. It's like driving through Death Valley in the summer and seeing the sign that shows only 120 miles left until Las Vegas, less than two hours. Thank Heavens! Incidentally, both of those prophetic pronouncements would be valued for generations to come for the hope they continue to inspire within God's people when the world looks bleak. Isaiah's prophecy was more like the road signs in southern Arizona that warn of flash flooding. For the paths before the Messiah to be made straight and the rough places smooth, one should expect tumultuous force powerful enough to change the landscape and through which nothing will be left unchanged. Ignoring that kind of message can only lead to peril! But it's those same disruptive waters that quench the ground and make the desert bloom. Both Isaiah and John recognized and warned the people to buckle up and hold on tight, while giving them the hope of salvation that lies on the other side of the pain of change.

One of the most significant gifts of the prophetic voice is its viewpoint. Prophets have an awareness of the bigger picture. They know and understand their current moment, but it is contextualized within the larger story of God. Baruch says "Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look towards the east," he is inviting them to see beyond their current moment so they could understand what God was preparing for the future. And when Paul prays for the Philippian church's participation in the work of the gospel, he prays not just for their love to increase. He prays that their love would be shaped by their insight and discernment. Our ability to participate in God's work, doing the labor of love with true

insight means we have to be able to see the road we are on. We must understand where that road has come from and where it is headed. As prophets, we must continually do the work of reading the road signs, making necessary corrections, and stay headed in the proper direction, even when the road is steep and the way long. When we do that, we can **trust** the direction God has us headed. We can be confident, even between the signs, when the road seems difficult and the terrain unfamiliar, even threatening.

As we follow the example of Baruch, of the Psalmist, of Isaiah and John, of Jesus and Paul, we start with ourselves. Perhaps you have never considered yourself in this line of prophetic voices.... But none of us are merely passengers on this road trip of life. We are each navigators. We use the tools we have, the words of Scripture, the relationship with God we develop through prayer, and the comfort and encouragement we gain through our friends, the modern-day prophets to help us navigate our course. And then, when we are able, we act as prophetic voices ourselves. We help hold up road signs for our friends, our families, and the church. We encourage, uplift, warn, and love others with the same tools we use to chart our own course.

Today we lit the Peace Candle. The prophetic message always ends with peace because Christ came as the ultimate peacemaker. The prophetic voice is always offering hope as we make our way ever closer into that peace. But we do not live in peaceful times, so we prophetically and faithfully map our course towards peace while we wait for all flesh to see the salvation of God.

May we be a people who share in the work of the gospel, praying diligently for the church, gifted with the wisdom to love well, and willing to both take and offer direction as we navigate our way into God's kingdom. Amen

