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## Speaking Prophetically

In our Bibles, there are at least 15 books which are labelled as prophetic books, Isaiah to Ezekiel and then what we normally refer to as the minor prophets, Hosea to Malachi. Daniel, while containing prophetic material, is often categorized as more of an apocalyptic book, more in line with the book of Revelation. In addition to the writings of the prophets, we encounter a number of other prophets in Scripture, the main ones being Elijah and Elisha. Nearly all of the prophets (with the exception of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi who prophesied after the exile) lived during the period of time recorded for us in 2 Kings.

According to Deuteronomy 18:14ff. the office of the prophet was occasional, meaning that prophets were called by God to their task only during times when the occasion demanded it. The occasions which demanded prophets were almost always during times when God's people had strayed from the truth and had engaged in varying kinds of ungodly beliefs and practices. Elijah, for example, did almost all of his work during the time of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel who together were leading the people to abandon God and worship the Canaanite god, Ba'al. Nathan appears on the scene after David had committed adultery and murder and thought he had gotten away with his sin. Isaiah is called by God to go to the nation of Judah when its king began to consider finding help from foreign nations rather than seeking help from God. Jeremiah was given the difficult task of calling God's people to account when they had all but forgotten him. Prophets were used by God to call people to account and turn them back from their sin.

Being a prophet was a thankless task, for most often the people did not want to hear the prophet's message. Generally, things seemed to be going quite well for the people as the economy boomed, as jobs were plentifully, as there was little threat of war. The people had come to believe that they really didn't need God and that obedience to him was not all that important. The prophets were sent by God to warn the people that their good lives would disintegrate if they did not turn back to God and live faithfully before him. This was an unpopular message, not well received by the prosperous people to whom the prophets were sent. Sometimes the prophets were treated horribly. Tradition has it, for example, that Isaiah was sawn in two when after being pursued by King Ahaz, he hid in a hollow tree. Ahaz ordered the tree cut down with Isaiah inside. Jeremiah spent weeks in a nearly dry well because he didn't deliver a positive message to the king but rather warned of impending defeat to a marauding army from the north. Elijah was forced to flee for his life and live in loneliness and obscurity for three and a half years as the king and his wife sought to take his life. God provided for him, but his life was not easy.

Speaking prophetically became more urgent the more God's people turned away from him. The greater their sin, the more they needed to hear God's voice. While the prophets often had a harsh and negative message, we must be reminded that God sent his prophets to his people not to announce impending doom but to call them to repentance so that the doom could be avoided. God did not want his people to forget him because if they did, they would not longer receive the blessings he offered to them. The collapse of their world and the resulting devastation was something that God wanted to avoid. Unfortunately, the people refused to listen, and God left his people to experience what life was like without him. We might judge the prophets to be unsuccessful because it was rare that the people returned to the

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Lord when called to do so. The one notable exception is Jonah who was so highly successful that the entire population of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, was on its knees in repentance only hours after he began to announce God's anger with their sin. Oddly, the people of Nineveh responded positively to a prophet's warnings while the people of Israel did not.

The question that arises is this: does God still raise up prophets today? The Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A 31,32) indicates that just as Jesus Christ is prophet, priest, and king, so we also, as his followers have that calling. In other words, the church, God's children through Jesus Christ, have a prophetic ministry. The urgency of that calling is determined by the state of the world in which we live. To determine that, we need to judge the state of the world around us, not on the basis of how luxurious or easy life is, but on the basis of God's Word, the Bible. We may not assume that just because we have it pretty good right now that we are in line with the Word of God. Prosperity can be deceiving, for prosperity obscures the reality of how things are, and we can be misled to think that just because we are prospering does not mean that we are faithful.

I think it is safe to say that Canadian faithfulness to Scripture has been declining, perhaps quite rapidly, over the past decades. At the same time, we are far more prosperous than we were half a century ago. It is not an easy thing to speak God's Word in this kind of situation, for we will have to say that things are not going well, and we will look like we are deluded. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't be willing to be used as prophets to our communities. If we truly care about our unbelieving family, friends and neighbours, then we do need to call them to account according to God's Word. God didn't send prophets to condemn the world; rather, he sent them to bring people back to himself so that they could know his grace and love. God's primary business is not condemning; it is saving. And that is the task of the church as well. As we love the world around us, we do need to speak prophetically, as unpopular as that might be. And, even more, we should also consider that speaking prophetically needs to be backed up by prophetic lives, meaning that we live according to God's Word first.

I have a feeling that the world around us is not going to become more faithful to God's Word, and it certainly won't if it doesn't know what God has said. Thus, the prophetic voice is more urgently needed now than ever before. Let us only pray that the results of our work will be much more like Jonah's than that of the other prophets. Of course, changes in others' hearts are not our doing but the work of the Holy Spirit. Our call is not to change people; it is to be God's voice, to speak prophetically so that people can hear God's voice and respond and be saved.

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