

Apostolic versus Prophetic



Psalm 137:

1 By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, * when we remembered you, O Zion.

2 As for our harps, we hung them up * on the trees in the midst of that land.

3 For those who led us away captive asked us for a song, and our oppressors called for mirth: * "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." (they said)

4 (But) How shall we sing the LORD'S song * upon an alien soil.

If you have been following the first Reading on Sunday for the last six weeks, you will have watched the efforts of the Prophet Jeremiah to warn the people of Judah of the great danger they were in as a nation. Jeremiah, like the prophet Ezekiel before him, called upon the people to repent and to change their ways, and foretold of great doom and destruction if they did

not. Sadly, the people did not listen the prophets. In their great pride, they could not believe that their beloved Jerusalem could ever actually fall to the Babylonians, or to anyone --- not Jerusalem, not the City of David.

Like the earlier prophets, Jeremiah often acted out his message. On one occasion, for example, he bought a clay flask and broke it into pieces in the public square to show how Jerusalem would be broken into fragments. In the lesson four weeks ago, he warned the people about how the potter can rework a vessel of clay, if it becomes spoiled. On another occasion, Jeremiah famously put a wooden yoke on his neck to illustrate that sovereignty of the Babylonian king over Israel. But the temple prophet Hananiah took the yoke from Jeremiah's neck and broke into two, saying this was a symbol that God would break the yoke of the Babylonian king over Israel, and restore to their homeland those who had been deported. Jeremiah soon returned with a yoke of iron, a yoke that could not be broken by human effort, for it was, he said, God who ruled. When Jeremiah preached against the Temple, the priests there had Jeremiah seized, flogged, and put in stocks for the night. There were also several death threats against the prophet. Hunted as a public enemy at times and as a traitor to the king, Jeremiah went into hiding for a period.

Nonetheless, in the year 588 Before the Common Era, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem to quell a local rebellion of the Jews and lay siege to the city. This, however, was a terrible siege that lasted 30 months. Bread was so scarce that the Jews according to their own Scriptures, resorted to cannibalism, boiling their own children for food (Lam. 4.10). Death stalked the streets and came in at the windows (9.21), wrote Jeremiah, who continued to prophesize doom and destruction, which the king of Judah believed was weakening the hands of his soldiers and the will of his people (38.4-5). So, Jeremiah was again arrested, beaten, and thrown into prison (37.11-5). Then he was moved to court of the royal guard, who demanded that Jeremiah be put to death. So, they lowered him down by ropes into a dry cistern and there he was left to die in the mire. But after the fall of the city, which was leveled to the ground, friends came and rescued Jeremiah.

Yet even so in the midst of this terrible siege, Jeremiah did a remarkable thing in last week's reading. He bought a piece of land, a piece of land that the Babylonians were actually occupying at the time. While he was still in prison, Jeremiah carried out the transaction according to the proper legal form and had the deeds put away for safekeeping. To Jeremiah, this purchase of land was a sign from God that the people of Israel

would return one day to the Promised Land, that "houses and fields and vineyards shall be possessed again in the land."

Nonetheless, in today's first reading from the beginning of the Scroll of Lamentations, a work traditionally ascribed to Jeremiah, the city of Jerusalem is now desolate. In today's Psalm, the people of Judah, now captives, sat down by the waters of Babylon and wept, and could not sing the songs of Zion on foreign soil. They longed for a return to their Promised Land; they longed for 'good ole days.'

There are many in the Christian Church today who long for the good ole days as well. Long before the pandemic, the Church has been struggling with declining attendance, fewer and fewer children and young adults, waning revenues, crumbling old buildings, and more and more pressure to cut the budget, to consider merging, or even closing. The pandemic only added to the burdens of clergy of not knowing what to do in such an uncharted and alien soil, unable to sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land. The ongoing lament of so many of my friends in the Church has been heart-wrenching at times. Pastoral ministry has become incredibly difficult these last few decades, especially now as we emerge from the pandemic and all the changes it has wrought in our lives. Change is always difficult and slow, especially in the Church, and every month now as a member of the Standing Committee of the diocese, we vote to close or merge churches, or to allow

them to sell off property to survive. Too few priests and parish leaders, it seems to me, have any training or insight into organizational transformation --- ministry has become for many a deeply painful vocation. But some of that pain, I believe, may be self-inflicted.

For example, I had a conversation with a priest friend recently who was smarting over the backlash to her recent sermon, where she had preached on the need for her parish to stop being a social club and to start being a mission center. I responded to her, "You were just being prophetic, right?" "Yeah," she said. "I was calling them to do more." So, I replied, "So you were being a prophet, but you're surprised that they are treating you like a prophet? Isn't this why most prophets lived in the desert? They had to hide from everyone trying to kill them for their prophecies." She paused, looked at me for a moment, buried her head in her hands, and laughed: "Oh Gawd. So, what am I supposed to do?"

Why do so many of the clergy want to model their ministry after the prophets? It's not like ancient Jewish prophecies prevented the Assyrian conquest or the Babylonian exile. They rarely led to change. Why do we think being prophetic should work any better today, telling people what they should believe and how they should act? A half-century of decline in the Church may suggest otherwise.

And most clergy were trained to be prophetic by tenured seminary professors, who have typically never led a congregation or congregational transformation. I suggest the New Testament offers us a much better example of ministry than that of the prophets: I prefer the *apostolic* model. What's the difference between the two?

Prophetic preaching and leadership, grounded in bold, critical truth-telling, often delivers messages and directives like a bombshell. Repent, or you will go to hell, they say! Meanwhile the apostolic model speaks truth, but it does so through "pursu(ing) righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, (and) gentleness," as described in the letters to Timothy, or to the Galatians (Galatians 5:22-23), a lifestyle which is more effective, I think, at inspiring actual transformative living, being, and doing, than that of the prophets constantly scolding the people.

Prophetic preaching has its time and place, yes. When done well, as in Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech, it poetically points out the evils of the world while inspiring people to follow God's call to transform it. But it only rarely has a major impact, and usually only through the voices of a genuine prophet (who is often then abused or killed for their efforts).

The apostolic approach is instead, I believe, deeply relational, establishing communities of diverse people working and eating together, praying for one other, worshiping and serving their communities shoulder to shoulder. Transformation arises out of the relationships we establish with each other and with God. As the Mennonite historian Alan Kreider noted, "The (Apostolic church) sources rarely indicate that the early Christians grew in number because they won arguments; instead they grew because their habitual behavior was distinctive and intriguing. Their habits . . . enabled them to address intractable problems that ordinary people faced in ways that offered hope."

Rather than dropping an explosive prophecy and then, like Elijah, fleeing the wrath of those who can't handle the truth, the apostles became part of the community where they ministered — learning its language, rituals, families, food, experiences and establishing deep personal relationships. The apostolic model recognizes a deep but profound truth: *people who feel loved by us are much more willing to be transformed by us*. It's why, despite frequent religious persecution in the Roman Empire, people were eager to join the early Christian church. Aware of the danger, they still wanted to become part of the Christian community.

To be apostolic means seeing people as "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36). Like

Jesus, it wants to gather them together “as a hen gathers her brood under her wings” (Luke 13:34). It’s firm *but* gentle, truthful *yet* understanding, principled, *but* healing.

What does apostolic leadership look like? It’s *leadership* that seeks to transform people morally, spiritually, psychologically and relationally through worship, education, fellowship, personal relationships, and social outreach. It often encourages and challenges us, but rarely berates us. No shame, blame, or criticizing of self or others here. Instead, it nurtures a deep awareness and sense of God’s immediate presence and personal call in our lives. It believes that encountering and experiencing God will transform us, and that transformed people act differently than others.

The emphasis on spiritual transformation becomes the foundation for everything else – for worship, ministry, mission, care for our buildings, child and adult education, stewardship, pastoral care, and even preaching.

Going back to the priest I mentioned, I encouraged her to stop trying to drop truth grenades and instead focus on the relationships. Preach and teach and organize and lead in a way that fosters personal transformation through the awareness of God’s presence in our lives, and of God’s call in our midst. Challenge everyone, but do so in a way that’s invitational and encouraging, rather than critical and blaming. Let God be

responsible for delivering the personal prophetic message that calls on us to transform the world in our own unique ways, and which allows us, in the end, to sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land. In my experience, leading people to listen for and to follow God is what leads to the creative transformation of the world around us, and of our churches. In essence, leave us to be transformed by God and let God be the one who call us into transformational acts. In my experience, this works. AMEN.