

SSS 2020 Lecture 1 (Jessie). TEXTS

“The word of the Lord came to me ...” – The Prophetic Calling

1. What is a prophet?

Cambridge Dictionary: (1) a person who is believed to have a special power that allows them to say what a god wishes to tell people, especially about things that will happen in the future; a person who supports a new system of beliefs and principles.

Godly Play: “A prophet is someone who comes so close to God and God comes so close to the prophet that the prophet knows what God wants. ...Prophets know what is most important They show us the way.”

Marcus Borg: “... God-intoxicated voices of radical social criticism and God-intoxicated advocates of an alternative social vision. Their dream is God’s dream.”¹

Walter Brueggemann:² “..a prophet is someone that tries to articulate the world as though God were really active in the world. And, that means on the one hand, to identify those parts of our world order that are contradictory to God, but on the other hand, it means to talk about the will and purpose that God has for the world that will indeed come to fruition even in circumstances that we can’t imagine.”

<https://sojo.net/media/what-does-it-mean-be-prophetic-today>

The task of the prophet is twofold:

- Criticising – challenging the dominant culture and ways of thinking
- Energizing – creating hope in new possibilities.

2. Prophetic Calls

The Hebrew word for prophet - *Nabi* - sounds like the Hebrew word for 'call'. True prophets are called by God. Prophets are God's messengers, and their call stories also tell us something fundamental about the themes of their prophecies.

Call narratives are a specific genre in the bible. These are their typical elements:

- Divine call - God speaks
- Commission - the prophet is given a task
- Objection - the prophet objects
- Reassurance - God reassures the prophet
- Equipping - the prophet is given what they need by God
- Sign - the prophet is given a sign, which often encapsulates the heart of their ministry.

¹ *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time. Taking the Bible seriously but not literally* New York: HarperOne 2002.

² *The Prophetic Imagination*, Anniversary Edition, Fortress Press, 2018.

The Call of Moses

Moses is the archetypal prophet. His call narrative is given in **Exodus 2:23-4:17**.

2 ²³After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. ²⁴God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

3 ¹Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." ¹¹But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹²He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

¹³But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.' " ¹⁵God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.

¹⁶Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt. ¹⁷I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.' ¹⁸They will listen to your voice; and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to

him, 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; let us now go a three days' journey into the wilderness, so that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.' ¹⁹I know, however, that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. ²⁰So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will perform in it; after that he will let you go. ²¹I will bring this people into such favor with the Egyptians that, when you go, you will not go empty-handed; ²²each woman shall ask her neighbor and any woman living in the neighbor's house for jewelry of silver and of gold, and clothing, and you shall put them on your sons and on your daughters; and so you shall plunder the Egyptians."

4 ¹Then Moses answered, "But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.' " ²The Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff." ³And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it. ⁴Then the Lord said to Moses, "Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail" —so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand— ⁵"so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you."

⁶Again, the Lord said to him, "Put your hand inside your cloak." He put his hand into his cloak; and when he took it out, his hand was leprous, as white as snow. ⁷Then God said, "Put your hand back into your cloak" —so he put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored like the rest of his body— ⁸"If they will not believe you or heed the first sign, they may believe the second sign. ⁹If they will not believe even these two signs or heed you, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground."

¹⁰But Moses said to the Lord, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." ¹¹Then the Lord said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? ¹²Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." ¹³But he said, "O my Lord, please send someone else." ¹⁴Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, "What of your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. ¹⁵You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. ¹⁶He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him. ¹⁷Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs."

The Call of Isaiah – Isaiah 6

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" ⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" ⁹And he said, "Go and say to this people:
'Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.'
¹⁰Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed."
¹¹Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said:
"Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is utterly desolate;
¹²until the Lord sends everyone far away,
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.
¹³Even if a tenth part remain in it,
it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak
whose stump remains standing
when it is felled."
The holy seed is its stump.

The Call of Jeremiah – Jer 1:4-16

Take special notice of verse 10. This is a summary statement of the prophetic task of critiquing and energising.

⁴Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
⁵"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."
⁶Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." ⁷But the Lord said to me,
"Do not say, 'I am only a boy';
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you,
⁸Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,

says the Lord.”

⁹Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth.

¹⁰See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

¹¹The word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” And I said, “I see a branch of an almond tree.” ¹²Then the Lord said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.” ¹³The word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying, “What do you see?” And I said, “I see a boiling pot, tilted away from the north.”

¹⁴Then the Lord said to me: Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. ¹⁵For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the Lord; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah. ¹⁶And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands. ¹⁷But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them. ¹⁸And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. ¹⁹They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you.

A few additional explanations on the two visions:

1. The first sign (v11-12). The Hebrew word for almond tree (*shaged*) sounds like the Hebrew word for 'watching' (*shoqed*) so this is a sound play. The almond tree is also the first to blossom - so the first to announce the spring, much like the cherry blossoms or the daffodils here.
2. The second vision does not rely on sound play, but on a strong image. The enemy will come like the boiling contents of a pot spilling over the land. Although if you look at a map, Babylon lies to the east of Israel, the invading armies would not cross the desert but come along the fertile crescent, and so they would approach Judah and Jerusalem from the north.

The call of 2nd Isaiah – Isaiah 49:1-6

¹Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The Lord called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.

²He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.

³And he said to me, “You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”

⁴But I said, "I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with the Lord,
and my reward with my God."

⁵And now the Lord says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honored in the sight of the Lord,
and my God has become my strength—
⁶he says,
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

The call of St Paul's Call – Gal 1:13-17

¹³You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. ¹⁴I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. ¹⁵But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, ¹⁷nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

3. Questions to think about:

1. How would you define a prophet?
2. Do you know any modern-day prophets?