

September 22, 2013
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

How to Talk Like a Prophet

In case you missed it, last Thursday, September 19, was International Talk Like a Pirate Day. That was the day to get out all your Avast, me hearties. And Aye, aye, maties and to end all of your sentences with Arrrr... If you missed Talk Like a Pirate day, well, there is always next year. But today, today, you can learn from Jeremiah how to talk like a prophet.

Now the first thing you have to do in order to talk like a prophet is that you have to be honest. Painfully so. As the great theologian Billy Joel once said, Honesty, is such a lonely word. And honestly that is very true. Just try being brutally honest with someone. Go ahead. Tell the host at your dinner party that truthfully the chicken was like a dried-out piece of shoe leather. Tell your neighbor honestly that you think their political bumper stickers prove they are idiots. Go ahead. Tell your spouse that those pants they are wearing look a little tight. But that's what you have to do if you want to be a prophet. You have to tell the honest truth. You have to say things that people need to know, but don't want to hear. You

point out their flaws and their failings. And you become that person that others avoid like the plague. That person that doesn't get invited to parties any more. Start talking like a prophet and you'll see. You will be very lonely indeed.

When prophets talk, they tell the truth. That's their job. That's their curse. And Jeremiah was a prophet who had been called to tell the truth to God's people. And that truth was a great big message of woe. That's the second thing you need to know in order to talk like a prophet. You need to say the word 'woe' a lot. Not like, Woah, dude. But woe as in woe is me. Woe to you! Woe to this world! This terrible, terrible world! Look at the sin and the depravity and the injustice. All we like sheep have gone astray! Woe! Woe to us! God's anger is kindled! Woe to you! The day of the Lord's judgment is coming! Woe to us all if you do not repent!

Woe pretty much sums up Jeremiah's message. And the message of every prophet that has ever come to God's people. Time after time. Prophet after prophet. Again and again they come with their brutal honesty. Woe to you and your wickedness. You and your faithlessness.

You and your false idols. Woe to you! Repent! Repent! Give up your sinful ways! No one likes to hear that they need to hear that message. And no one wanted to hear it from Jeremiah. This was around the year 627 BCE and King Josiah had just led a spiritual reformation of the people of Israel. He had renewed their commitment to the Lord God. He had gotten rid of the idols and the cults that were everywhere. But then King Josiah died. And a new king took charge. And once again the people drifted away to worship other gods. And add to that the threat of the Babylonian empire. Whose armies were on the doorstep of Jerusalem. War had already taken the Israelite communities to the north. They would be coming for Jerusalem next. But the looming disaster did not make them turn to God. It did not make them re-think their lives. It did not make them give up their idols or their attitudes of entitlement. If anything, the Israelites in Jerusalem and the surrounding country of Judah became more stubborn and resistant to the truth.

It was because they were from Jerusalem. God's hometown. They were from Jerusalem. They had the Temple, perched there on Mount Zion. It was God's holy place where God was physically present on earth. No

one could touch Zion. Nothing would harm it. This was Zion. God's city. Nothing could harm them. They would always be safe. This was Zion. God's city. They were entitled to God's protection and God's provision.

That sense of entitlement led the people to make some bad choices. They were special, so they didn't have to be as faithful. They were special, so they could do as they pleased. They could worship other gods and dabble in other cults. They could take God's commandments or leave them. They lived in Jerusalem right next to Zion, God's temple. The rules didn't really apply to them.

The people of God felt entitled. If there is a sin that our society might be guilty of, perhaps it is entitlement. We can be just like the people of Israel, claiming that God dwells here, this is Zion. Our land is special. We are special. God loves us more than anyone else. We are entitled to God's favor, so we don't have to think beyond ourselves. We are entitled to God's favor, so we don't have to be faithful or humble or self-sacrificing. This is Zion. So the rules don't apply to us. We can break a few commandments and serve a few other gods. Thomas Friedman

wrote in a New York Times article that American feel so entitled that they are unwilling to do hard things. Sacrifice is a word that our leaders never dare to utter. “All solutions must be painless. Which drug would you like? A stimulus perhaps, or a tax cut? Come up with a national policy that would force us to be more energy efficient and less destructive of the earth? That’s too hard. We have sent our best minds not to make computer chips in Silicon Valley but to make poker chips on Wall Street, while telling ourselves we can have the American dream — a home — without saving and investing, for nothing down and nothing to pay for two years. Our message to the world when it comes to tough decisions is “After you.”¹

Woe. Woe to you. Woe is me. Woe to us all. Jeremiah’s message to Jerusalem is a message for us. You are not special. You are not immune from the destruction that is to come. From suffering and hardship and tragedy. We are not entitled to ignore God’s commandments to care for one another and this earth nor will you be entitled to avoid the consequences of not doing so. You, who are worshipping at the idols of

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/12/opinion/12friedman.html?_r=0

business and consumerism. Stuff will not save you. Wall Street will not save you. Money will not save you. You can only serve one God. So which one will it be? The god of me and mine and more, more, more. Or the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Living God who calls us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. The Great I AM who did not take advantage of all of heaven's power, but emptied himself, and put himself in our shoes and entered into our pain. Who suffered and died that we might be able to live. Which is it? The god of self-giving love. Or the god of self-is-all-that-matters. Choose this day whom you will serve.

Maybe you've heard the term, jeremiad, before. If you haven't then you have today as you have just experienced one. The word jeremiad comes from the long, mournful complaints of Jeremiah. Who was cursed with telling people the truth they don't want to hear. And then he is cursed with having to watch the consequences of it all. In Jeremiah 8:19, we hear what happens. We hear the devastation and the confusion. We hear the people crying out when the Babylonian armies invade and the world comes crashing down. "Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in

her?" Is God not with us? How could this happen? This is God's dwelling place. We are God's people. This is Zion. How could this happen to us?

Now here is the third thing to know about how to talk like a prophet.

Once the chips have fallen. And the comeuppance has come, we have to be able to speak the language of heartbreak. It's one thing to be a

prophet spouting brutal honesty, condemning those around you. It's

another to stand with those same people as they face the consequences

and offer sympathy. It's an incredible thing that Jeremiah does. He had

warned them that things would fall apart. He had warned them that this

entitlement thing wouldn't mean a hill of beans. He had warned them

that they would lose Jerusalem, and the temple at Zion and everything

they thought would last forever. And when it happened, he could have

turned smugly and said, See, I told you so? Jeremiah had every right to

be smug after the way they had mocked him and ridiculed him and

ignored what he had to say. "I tried to tell you. I tried to tell you, but you

wouldn't listen. I guess you got what you deserved." Honestly, I think

that's where I would be. I would be smug. Oh, I would be smug. You bet

I would pull out that German word, schadenfreude (which means to take pleasure in someone else's misfortune) and I would use it and I would even throw it into a sermon.

But incredibly, Jeremiah doesn't do that. He doesn't respond with a 'see, I told you so'. He doesn't gloat. He doesn't smirk and say, So long, suckers and head off into the sunset. He sits down beside his people and he grieves with them. And he lifts their suffering up to heaven. "My joy is gone, he says. My heart is sick. Hark, the cry of MY poor people. For the hurt of My poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of MY poor people not been restored?"

MY poor people. Jeremiah sees these people who have been so opposed to him as his own people. Their pain is his pain. Jeremiah has something to teach us as the church? How often do we look at God's broken people around us and say, those people are my people? How often do we sit with people who have wandered and strayed and maybe brought a world of hurt on themselves and instead of saying I told you so, we say, I'm so sorry, let's pray for healing? How often do we, as the church, attend to

the hurts of the world and the misunderstandings and the mistakes and the regrets and the confessions about where it all went wrong and let it know that their pain is our pain and we will take that pain to God on their behalf because they are OUR people, God's people?

That's what prophetic communities do. They speak like prophets. They tell the honest truth, like Jeremiah, even when it's the lonely, lonely truth. They question. They challenge. They speak up. They plead for change. They proclaim that 'woe' will come upon us all if we do not make ourselves do better. And they pray. And they pray. And they pray. And they pray for God's mercy and healing in a broken world. For the children in our community who have no stable housing. For the elderly who have no friends left to visit them. For the veterans who face depression and PTSD. For the working poor who pray they don't get sick. For the victims of gun violence? For the people of Syria, the people of Congo, the people in the favelas in Brazil? We of all people must honestly see and feel the hurt of the world and pray.

Paul makes that clear in 1 Timothy. Pray, he commands us. Pray for everyone. Lift up this world in prayer. Be mediators of God's grace and

healing. Just like Jesus Christ. Who hears us and loves us and prays with us and feels the pain of his people, Is there a balm in Gilead? Is there healing? Is there redemption and joy and hope? How long, O Lord? How long until it is so? For the hurt of our poor people we are hurt, we mourn, we are dismayed. Send us your grace, O God. Let your justice come! Let your mercy come! Let your kingdom come! Restore us and deliver us, O God of our salvation, for your name's sake. Let your healing come.