

Jesus the Prophet

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We are well acquainted with the people who wanted to kill Jesus by the end. The occupying empire aligned with the religious elite, who finally cannot help but try to silence him with a cross.

And we may too remember the mutterings, as he traveled throughout Galilee, those who began secretly plotting against this radical rabble-rouser.

But here we are, back at the very beginning of his ministry. Without much of a following. Without a crowd to speak of. In his home town. In the synagogue. Among his own people.

And they want to kill him.

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This is the second week in our sermon series about four different parts of Jesus' identity. Last week we talked about Jesus our teacher, the one whose wisdom does not just change what we know in our minds, but is written on the tablet of our hearts, transforming who we are and how we live in the world in ways both big and small.

This week, we turn to Jesus the Prophet.

Now in popular usage, we take the word prophet usually to mean someone who tells the future.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman, in his book *The Prophetic Imagination* adds a little nuance describing prophesy in this way he writes: "prophets are in a way future-tellers, yet they are concerned with the future as it impinges on the present."

The future as it impinges on the present.

The prophets are those who look ahead, not with abstract visions of potential moments detached from our own. Rather, they are those who look ahead to tell us where we are headed now, and usually, to call us together to make a different future.

In today's story, placed near the start of his ministry, Jesus places himself squarely in this prophetic tradition.

He reads these ancient words of Isaiah:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

He rolls the scroll back up, and says. "Today, these words are fulfilled in your hearing"

And in one sense, I understand what he means by that. After all, Jesus was sent as a healer and liberator, the very presence of God's dreamed-for justice walking in the dust of our own world.

And yet, what does it mean to say that these words are fulfilled when Jesus' world remained torn by oppression at his death, the poor still mostly got bad news, and the captives by-and-large stayed that way?

What could it mean to say this prophesy is fulfilled, if we let our minds meander through the pain of history between that moment and this one?

What does it mean to say this prophesy is fulfilled when our own sunsets in Milton are tinted by the smoke of fires 3,000 miles away, when our society seems to take every opportunity to turn on one another, when each day we are each forced to calculate risk, again, and again, and again, as we stagger through a pandemic that has already killed nearly one million people, 200,000 in our own country?

But turning back to what Jesus said, "today, these words are fulfilled *in your hearing*."

Jesus is not suggesting that the prophets imagining has come true in an instant, like a granted wish.

Rather he is pointing people's eyes toward where the future impinging on the present. He is not telling us that the vision has come, but that now it *can come*.

Not that the work has finished, but that it has begun.

Here Jesus is proclaiming these words so that they may be fulfilled by those who *hear* them.

And I don't think he was just talking to them. I think he is talking to us.

This vision can be fulfilled in your hearing. Because Jesus has made a way for us in the world. Because Jesus has taken away the sting of death. Because Jesus has given us hearts that can truly live without fear.

Because Jesus has inspired us with the Holy Spirit. Because Jesus has come that we may have abundant life. Because Jesus has set us free from shame.

Liberty to the captive.
Freedom to the oppressed.
Good news to the poor.

On the scroll, they are just words.

They are fulfilled *in your hearing*.

Words alone cannot cause transformation, but they can initiate it.

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If you have driven by the church recently you likely noticed that we have unfurled a few new words on our own lawn.

Two banners.

One bears the current motto of our denomination, the United Church of Christ “a just world for all.”

The other bears the clarion call that pierces the conscience of our generation. Black lives matter.

Words.

Important words.

Words worthy of proclaiming.

And now, a big question: will they be fulfilled?

It is hard for me to confess this to you, but the first few times I encountered the phrase “black lives matter” the words stuck in my throat. And honestly I still find them arresting. They make me uncomfortable every time I see them or hear them. They still do not roll off my tongue.

This is not because I have ever doubted their truth. Nor is it because I have ever believed they were not worth saying.

But because, like the most powerful prophesy, they impinge into our present. Three simple words, to me have the most astonishing power to lay bare something ugly, uncomfortable, and yet undeniable about the road that we have been on.

I also think they hit me the way they do because the truth they ask us to acknowledge is not an especially lofty one. But the most basic affirmation of the value of human life.

Matters is the minimum.

It is the most foundational thing we could say about a human life, and yet, in our nation, it needs repeating, that black lives matter.

I will tell you that when I hear the words “black lives matter.” More often than not they make me want to fall to my knees and beg God’s forgiveness for the sins of my heart and the sins of our nation.

Without the knowledge of the grace I receive through Christ, I am not sure I could bear it.

And I will tell you that when I say the words “black lives matter.” More often than not my voice trembled with the fear that I will fail in my part of bringing God’s dreamed for world to life.

And without the courage I find in my prayers, and in Christian community, I am not sure I could bear it.

The words alone cannot cause transformation, but they can initiate it.

Will they be fulfilled in our hearing?

Given the freedom that we know in Christ, given the courage that faith has kindled in our spirits can we finally together build a community and a world that leans toward the future prophetically impinging on our present?

With these words on our lips, and on our lawn, our work isn’t over. It has begun.

Liberty to the captive.

Freedom to the oppressed.

Good news to the poor.

With these words to the crowd in Nazareth, Jesus invited his own people to see a new future impinging on their present.

And back in Nazareth, things did not go well. Jesus own community, who raised him, knew him, knew his parents, who loved him.

They became so angry that they tried to throw him off a cliff.

Its a startling turn, but I get it. I know that in myself. I expect many of us do. That part of us that rears up in the face of challenge. The part of us that becomes defensive when what we believe in our hearts is questioned.

That feeling that I couldn't possibly be wrong, that they couldn't possibly be right.

That feeling of wanting to get as far away as I can from the future vision that challenges my comfortable present.

I don't think any of us should be claiming the prophet's mantle in this moment. We are in that crowd, the crowd in whose hearing even these words could be fulfilled. And that crowd that can be so easily turn toward easy certainty in the face of challenging imagination.

We are not the prophets here.

We are in the crowd.

The crowd in whose hearing these words could be fulfilled.

Could be.

Really could be.