

Crying and Warning

Mark 1:1-8

John the Baptizer is a prime example of the Biblical role of Prophet. Though the word is now used to mean someone who predicts the future – But really soothsayer or even futurist are more accurate terms for that. The Biblical role of Prophet was one who spoke with the voice of God. They sometimes would announce logical consequences. “If you continue to be disobedient you will experience....” And the primary purpose of this was not to predict the future, but to warn the people about what will happen if they keep on their current path. At other times they would speak with empathy and compassion -crying with the people in their time of struggle. Comfort, Comfort Ye My people” as God tells Isaiah in the beautiful solo from Handel's Messiah. The prophet sometimes assures the people that God knows how bad things are and God is going to bring healing and salvation.

And in their effort at being polished vessels for God prophets often quite the devout and severe people. Some, like John, fast from food or eat bugs and honey from the hive and wear scratchy shirts so they are not distracted by the good things of the world and finely tuned to hear God’s voice so they can share it. Others, knowing how important their work is, employ political theatre or symbolic life actions like marrying a prostitute to communicate how unfaithful God’s people have been to God. Prophets sometimes even engage in absurd or comic descriptions. It is no wonder that we often use the words of 20th century writer and political humorists Finley Peter Dunne, to describe the prophet’s role. In talking about his work, Dunne said I: "Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable."

It is very fitting for a humorist to give us a succinct and clear definition of being a prophet. The role of prophet is very similar to the role of Jester or Fool in Medieval times. In that role, the Fool can say anything he wants to the King or Queen and often speaks the truths that all others are afraid to speak. And let me say that the Jester was often a short term role, because Jesters and Prophets often say things that are not popular with those in power. John the Baptist literally loses his head because he has

criticized the Roman appointed Jewish Governor, Herod for stealing his Brother's wife. But this is later on in the Gospel story.

The relationship between Prophets and Kings weaves in and out of scripture often. Usually it is a Prophet who anoints a new King/or in some times in Israel's history the new Judge. These two roles are connected to a third, the Priest in Biblical history. The Priesthood is a role that is passed from - in Biblical times - Father to son ad infinitum. Prophets and Kings are both called by God. This is the original "Separation of Powers." Kings head of the political/legal, Priests in charge of the religious/ritual purity and prophets keeping the other two honest.

One of the things we sense from our scripture is that one expectation for the prophet John the Baptist is to prepare the way for another - He is to prepare the way for Jesus. He is trying to get people to open their eyes - to awaken to the reality of God. He calls for repentance in order to prepare the people for the coming Messiah.

Judaism 101 tells us that Jewish thought has been along two lines about the Messiah, "in general, it is believed that the mashiach will come in a time when he is most needed (because the world is so sinful), or in a time when he is most deserved (because the world is so good). Certainly the time of John and Jesus is very bad, with a lot of terror and sin and horror. So maybe John feels his role is to call Israel to repentance so then the Messiah can come. Earlier the writer states that the Messiah is a "great military leader ...and judge," who will rule the world with righteousness. This traditional thought about what the Messiah will do is very strong in Jewish thought.

But Jesus is not going to become a military leader. The Messiah Jesus sees that the world is indeed full of sin, but also full of faith. It is neither perfect enough or bad enough for the Messiah King, so Jesus comes as a Prophet and a Priest Messiah. John prepares the way, and Jesus continue on it. Jesus calls for us to wake up, to turn around.

We understand the human desire to have God send someone who is going to fix this mess. Someone who is going to kick a few tails and get people into line. But it appears as though Jesus is not going to do that.

The Messiah Jesus comes and calls all – Rome, the Religious Leaders, The Priests to follow God. That is how God will transform the world... from the inside out... From the inside out... And so Jesus comes as a refugee child from the country – born to a poor family. And Jesus rises up to call even the Romans to see what God is doing.

In his book *Falling Upward* American religious leader Richard Rohr writes this about repentance, "We need to unlearn a lot, it seems, to get back to that foundational life which is 'hidden in God'. Yes, transformation is often more about unlearning than learning, which is why the religious traditions call it 'conversion' or 'repentance.'"

This is what both John the Baptizer and Jesus do, call us to unlearn all we have been told is "truth." That might makes right.... That God is always on "our" side... That we are ok as long as we follow the letter of the law but it's OK to find the loopholes so you can do what we really want. That the value of your life is determined by the color of your skin or the language you speak or the religion you espouse or who you love and who loves you. The list goes on and on. To quote that theologian and spiritual seeker Bob Dylan "Don't want to learn from nobody, what I gotta un-learn" What is it we have to unlearn today, as a culture and as individuals, What "truth" is keeping you from serving God from living awake and aware? What is keeping you from being the person God made you to be? This is the question of the Prophet to us.

The Prophet Messiah comes to wake us up, and knowing that death is the root of all fear – Jesus the Messiah Priest on his last night invokes the ancient belief in blood sacrifice by telling his disciples that he is offering his own blood for them – not necessarily as a payment of debt, but to help us remember, that God is the one who holds life and gives it. Not Rome, not Herod, not disease, not oppression, God is who gives life. Jesus shows us that we find life only by pouring out ourselves for others.

On that night as he gathered with his disciples for the Passover Meal...

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

