

Sermon offered by William Flanders at St. John's 7/9/2006

When I was a camper of eleven up in Maine, I wanted to try out for the camp newspaper as a reporter. I went to a meeting and the teenager in charge told us cubs to remember the four Ws: Who, What, Where and When. So off I went to my assignment featuring a talented camper who loved Count Basie. The next day I handed my story to the editor. It read: Who - Danny Harmon; What - Jazz piano concert; Where - the great lounge; When - last night. (Signed) Billy Flanders, reporter.

O.K., so my *reportage* was thrown in the waste paper basket. But I have never forgotten those simple basics. And I'm now asking outright: What is a prophet? Who is a prophet? When is a prophet?

About six weeks ago Paul Abernathy, rector of St. Mark's where I go when I'm not here, preached a sermon about being a prophet. It was stirring, truly. And now I can't seem to remember a word he said. Which makes me speculate that in six weeks from now none of you will remember a word of this sermon. With that probability sitting on my shoulders like an albatross, I can only ask, "Why should you? What does being a prophet have to do with your lives?"

I'm going to give you just one person's answer - and not an answer that would probably stand up in a seminary class, and certainly not in a dictionary. But see if this touches you in any way: A prophet is a person who, at a critical moment, and out of his or her own experience, gives beneficial advice to another. I'll say that again. A PROPHET IS A PERSON WHO, AT A CRITICAL MOMENT, AND OUT OF HIS OR HER OWN EXPERIENCE, GIVES BENEFICIAL ADVICE TO ANOTHER.

What? - A prophet is a counselor. Who? - A prophet is somebody who advises from experience. When? - A prophet knows the moment must be critical or the advice, the opinion, the observation, will be ignored.

I know - what about that special holy commission to "Go and Prophecy!"? What about the key words: "Thus says the Lord!"? What about the visions: the wheel in the sky, the dry bones? What about the revelation of the future: the "Every valley shall be exalted," and "The lion shall lie down with the lamb"? Now that's prophecy with class!

Yes, there's the Old Testament prophets, and there's the New Testament prophets. And all I'm giving you is a PPP, a pretty plain prophet. But you and I are pretty plain folk, at least most of the time. Wouldn't it be nice, at least once in our life, if we were able to offer an opinion, point out something, even say "No!" - or "Yes!" - and know that it was just the right advice, just the right word, and at the right time? Of course that's the age-old wish of every parent. Read ZITS in the comics. But isn't it also the hope of every true friend? Read MARY WORTH in the comics. I do.

But let's look at the three persons we've heard from or about today: Ezekiel the Old Testament prophet, Jesus the Christ, and Paul the Apostle. They had at least one common experience: they each heard a voice, either audibly or internally, a voice they believed was divine. Ezekiel, at the time of hearing, felt that a spirit had entered him. Jesus heard his voice as coming from a father in the heavens. Paul believed the voice he heard came from the very Jesus whose followers he'd been persecuting.

Hearing voices, as we know, can be a tricky experience. When I was a curate in a church in rural Virginia, I once drove far off a country road to locate and persuade a farmer to rent a house he owned to a family in need. The farmer got off his tractor, talked with me a bit, then took me over to his old car. He opened the door and asked me, "Do you hear them voices?" I said nothing, and he reached under the front seat and pulled out a revolver. "I hear 'em all the time," he said. "I hear 'em now."

Was this a prophet? Did it really matter? I can tell you, I've never been as grateful as I was that day to just get back on a paved road and head for home! I don't think hearing voices is required for a pretty plain prophet.

A prophet is a counselor whose advice comes out of experience, is given at a critical moment, and benefits another.

Ezekiel was a Jewish priest who lived through the critical period before, during, and after the catastrophic capture and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BC. Like Winston Churchill, he warned his people of 'the gathering storm,' but to little avail. Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he stayed with his people when the storm burst. Ezekiel went with them into forced exile. And it wasn't until the exile, most probably, that the Jewish people began to listen to Ezekiel, especially when he urged them to believe that the exile would end, that they would eventually return to Jerusalem, that their dry bones would once again know life. His advice:

Don't give up hope; prepare yourselves; trust in God's presence. This was not the counsel of some ancient sooth-sayer for these poor people eeking out a living so far from home. Ezekiel was one of them, had experienced what they had. And so they honored him as a true prophet, this man who spoke and wrote out of his own fears, through his own humiliation and loss, and out of his own longings.

Quite different is the account of Jesus' short-lived return to his hometown of Nazareth. After his growing success and expanding reputation following his ministry around the Sea of Galilee and in the city of Capernaum, you'd have thought he would be the most honored guest when he returned to speak in the Nazareth synagogue. It seems to have started out that way. Mark says, "Many who heard him were astounded."

But then certain realities begin to temper feelings. "Hey! Where does he get all this stuff? We knew him when - you know, the carpenter, Mary's boy, with all those brothers and sisters. What's so hot about him? Why is he any better, any wiser, any more powerful than us?!" And Jesus is clearly thrown. Probably at first he can't believe the suspicion and the hostility of his former friends and neighbors. But reality finally grips him, and he somewhat saves face by challenging them with: "a prophet is honored everywhere except in his hometown and among his own family."

We don't have many records of Jesus's personal failures, but this certainly is one. What went wrong? Was there something he forgot to do - or refused to do - that turned the crowd against him? Was there something he might have done that could have dispelled their hostility?

I think there may be an answer in the Apostle Paul's letter to his former friends and followers in Corinth, a letter written decades after Jesus's day in Nazareth. Paul writes: "A thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated." He might have said, "To keep me from getting too carried away with myself as a prophet." What was this "thorn in the flesh" that Paul admits to? There has been much speculation, but no one really knows. Though it had to be a chronic condition that impeded, possibly pained, certainly embarrassed him. And it tempered his rather exalted self-image. But the important thing is that it forced Paul to speak and preach, out of his own experience of suffering, to others who who only too aware of their own.

We all have a hard time turning away from persons whose advice and encouragement does not deny or hide their own hurts and failures.

This is why it's hard to turn away from Jesus - not Jesus the home-coming prophet, but the Jesus who fully gave himself to the experience of doubt and fear and suffering and death, and speaks to us today out of all of that.

Who is a prophet? I would say that any of us whose counsel is given with the knowledge and admission that we, too, have sought and striven, stumbled and succumbed, maybe have settled ourselves (somewhat), and now say simply: "This, out of my experience, is what I see."

In this sort of "weakness," we, too, may find strength. Amen.