

Message: Introduction 1/1: Remedial Prophecy

Introduction:

Well, friends. Today's a...weird day. It's weird in all sorts of ways. It's weird to not talk about Matthew, for me, anyway.

It's weird because today's message, is one of two introductions to our new series on the Minor Prophets.

Today we're going to focus on Prophecy in general; next week we'll talk about the Minor Prophets. After I pray we're going to first talk about how the Old Testament frames what a prophet is and isn't, what prophecy is and isn't, and from there, we'll go into the New Testament, and how the New Testament's understanding of these things impacts the life of the Church today.

Easy, right? I've got 17 minutes. But first:

This can be kinda boring stuff, you know? That is, introduction messages are rarely invigorating or inspiring. They're setting us up for something. I hope I'm thorough without being stultifying. I hope I don't use any more words like that, because I don't want you to beat me up in the parking lot. In the end, I think we'll get prophecy, and even wonder where it is in our lives today, which won't be so bad. But today's message is an informational one, not an inspiring one.

Let's pray.

Prayer:

Minor Prophets?

So. Back to the Minor Prophets for a sec. We call them the Minor Prophets because they were all actually under 18. I'm kidding. They were actually all very high-pitched. We call them the Minor Prophets because they were tiny books, small, compared to the books we call the Major Prophets of the Old Testament--Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel. There are 15 books that we identify as "prophetic" in the Old Testament.

So our Old Testament has what we'd call 12 Minor Prophets, 12 books--or letters, written things--that are "minor," smaller, and 3 enormously long things--Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

Our walk through the Minor Prophets, these 12 smaller prophetic books, demands that we talk about Old Testament prophecy in general before we talk about them in particular.

So to do that, let's talk about what a prophet is.

What's a prophet?

Here's what a prophet is: A prophet is someone who speaks for God. Simple, right? A prophet is someone who speaks for God.

What's a prophet? Israel's Situation:

Deuteronomy 18 was read to us today. Remember, in terms of the history of Israel, Deuteronomy comes as Moses, speaking for God, shares with the People of Israel all that God is going to require of them as they are established in Canaan. God's promised to redeem all creation through this group of people, he's been working through the cultural norms, the cultural assumptions, the view of the world that the Ancient Near East had. But God has been positioning the Israelites to be different from the surrounding people groups in major, major ways, break traditions that everyone just accepts as normal, from what to eat, to what to wear, to how to forgive debts or repay wrongs.

And one of the ways that Israel will be different from other people, is in their search for, oh, let's say special knowledge. Insight into the world.

What's a prophet? Longing for Insight:

We people are always trying to get behind the scenes, you know? Figure out some way to game the system, life itself, or discover an inside track to whatever it is we really want. We sense that there's more than meets the eye, and we want to see that stuff, not be blind to it. It's a human urge. And it's reasonable, because, as the Bible makes clear, there's a lot going on around us that is unseen. There is a supernatural world, higher or above the natural world, and God lets Israel

know, even if they don't want to hear it, that He's in charge of that world, that realm, and that he gets to determine our access to that realm. All the nations around them try other ways; for Israel, their way has to be through him. And God's People are promised that when God needs to speak to them, He will.

Here's what God has Moses tell the Israelites. (I'm reading from the Common English Bible, here.):

9 Once you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, don't try to imitate the detestable things those nations do. 10 There must not be anyone among you who passes his son or daughter through fire; who practices divination, is a sign reader, fortune-teller, sorcerer, 11 or spell caster; who converses with ghosts or spirits or communicates with the dead. 12 All who do these things are detestable to the Lord! It is on account of these detestable practices that the Lord your God is driving these nations[c] out before you.

13 Instead, you must be perfect before the Lord your God. 14 These nations you are displacing listened to sign readers and diviners, but the Lord your God doesn't permit you to do the same! 15 The Lord your God will raise up a prophet like me from your community, from your fellow Israelites. He's the one

you must listen to.

God speaks, then, through Moses:

17 “I’ll raise up a prophet for them from among their fellow Israelites—one just like you. I’ll put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. 19 I myself will hold accountable anyone who doesn’t listen to my words, which that prophet will speak in my name. 20 However, any prophet who arrogantly speaks a word in my name that I haven’t commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods—that prophet must die.

To be a prophet is to speak for God: “in my name,” God puts it. You aren’t a robot; you have your self in play--you can lie. You can freelance, apparently, if you want. But if you don’t act with integrity, communicating only what God gives you to communicate, then you’ll die.

This job is not one you want. We see it a number of times in the Old Testament: People aren’t eager to be prophets. Because to communicate what God wants to communicate to His People often puts you against people, people who now and then want to kill you. At best, it’s a dangerous hassle, which, if you insert your own will into the mix will make you deserving of death, at the worst, you’re killed by those who don’t want God to communicate to them. .

From a perspective that takes into account God's intentions to redeem all creation through Israel, and bless the entire world through what they say and Israel's obedience to it, though, there isn't a more important position than prophet. You get to be the mouthpiece of God, the one that positions the always small, yet ever present group of God's faithful People, to keep the faith, keep hope, keep all that is necessary so that redemption might come. Which isn't bad, until people in power kill you.

What's Prophecy?

So. If Prophets are those who speak for God--let's say communicate for God, right? Prophets are those who communicate for God. Then what's prophecy?

Prophecy is the message prophets communicate. Easy, right? Prophecy is the message prophets communicate.

And the types of messages prophets communicate are many.

What we see the prophets say most often are two types of speech: they get called fore-telling, and forth-telling.

Messages: Foretelling

Fore-telling we know. This is what most of us think of when we think prophecy. It's telling the future. Prophets communicate what's to come.

And they communicate what's to come most often not so that people can prepare well, stock up on batteries, but so that people can change how they're living, and change the future to come.

Prophets don't forecast, so that people can get ready; they foretell, so that people can change how they're living, and just possible, change the future that's coming upon them.

What the Old Testament prophets do, often, is function as the reminders of the promise that bad things are coming upon them unless they return to the Lord. Most of these oracles of the future are "unless" oracles, the "if" is still an "if."

Some oracles of the future, though, are simply "It's too late. This is going to happen." The prophets, as they foretell this future, do have a message that can bring hope to those who still decide to realign their lives with God's purposes for them. The prophets promise: "God will protect a remnant of Israel to see His redeeming purposes through to their end."

They know "For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors, which he confirmed to them by oath." But they have to find peace in God's places, not their own futures, because there's not "if" in the bad news they've heard.

Messages: Forth-telling

But most of what the prophets speak aren't messages of the future. Most of prophecy isn't about the future at all; it's about the present. The messages that God has the prophets communicate are messages of how people must change, right now. If they change, then maybe God will change what's headed on them, too, but that's not the point God is making. The point of what the prophets say is simply that Israel has strayed from God, and must return. The prophets, speaking for God, call out the ways that Israel has strayed from the unique calling in the world. Sometimes God declares the message for another people, non-Israelites. Sometimes the prophet speaks to Judah, the Southern Kingdom, sometimes to Israel, the Northern Kingdom. Sometimes God declares a message against another people entirely. We'll see all these cases as we look at The Minor Prophets.

Messages: Ways

And the prophets communicate these things in various ways. They present divine lawsuits, where God brings a case against Israel or humanity or some other people group, and all creation is called into play as the witness against whoever is being charged.

The prophets will act out the message that they're going to give in a way that demands attention, causes ridicule, invites gossip. They do things you can't look away from: lay naked and burn their own poo for fuel. Marry and divorce women of

ill-repute. They tear their clothes. They act out what it is they're trying to communicate, and their behavior becomes symbolic of what it is they're trying to say. These are called "speech-acts," symbolic behaviors, acted out, that powerfully communicate to those paying attention.

The prophets will have visions, and write down the things that they've seen, and--most of the time--go on to translate these visions into the oracles of salvation or oracles of woe or lawsuits or blessings or judgments that God has given the prophet to say.

These speech acts, these visions, these divine charges--which foretell what's to come, and forth-tell, speak forth against the way people are living now--these are the ways that God communicates through the prophets, and broadly, what God communicates.

Interpretation: Tests!

But the Minor Prophets weren't just written for the edification of God's People over time; they spoke to people. They had enormous power, right? And they could abuse it.

So those who first heard from a prophet needed to know that the prophet wasn't lying. We already heard one test that God offered:

If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord

does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed.

You see the problem here, right? If a prophet foretells the future, we don't have to be alarmed, and the prophet's spoken presumptuously, if what he says doesn't take place. But we won't know that until the future, right? So. This isn't much of a test. It does one thing, though, which is let us know that the prophet is untrustworthy from here on out. And these guys--they were basically all guys--weren't in it just for a season; most were career prophets, if you could call it that.

There are others. (Source: PDF acquired someplace. No author.)

Moses says, speaking for God in Deuteronomy 13, that if a prophet suggests Israel should "follow other gods," and "worship them," then that person, "a prophet or one who foretells by dreams...and announces...a sign or wonder," then that prophet's evil, trying to turn Israel away from God. This is a "theological test," of a kind, and easier to figure out in the moment, you know? And God's engaged in this, this can be considered a trial, a test, of faith, and Israel is supposed to take it that way, and turn against this prophet who isn't a prophet at all.

One other way to test a prophet as he speaks is to check the

life they live. It's a sort of "moral test." Jeremiah in particular outlines how important this is.

There's a moral check on a prophet's words: If their way of life wasn't a faithful one, then they had to be disregarded.

So: If a prophet said something would happen, and it didn't, they were untrustworthy. You could disregard them. The caveat to this is that you didn't know at the time, and, honestly, sometimes God gave His People an out through the prophet: The future, if it was being told, could be changed depending on their behavior. If a prophet led people into idolatry, into people living for pagan gods, then they were out. If they were morally bankrupt, liars and on the side of evil against the people, enabling sin and rejection of God, they weren't God's prophets.

Interpretation: View of God

And as we read the prophets--Major or Minor--we have to expect a consistent understanding of who God is and what God is about. We'll be reading these different Minor Prophets, and so much of what they say sounds just...crazy.

Nonsensical, at first. What they reveal will make us wonder about God. And yet, what I promise, and what Scripture reveals, is that with just a little bit of attention, as we seek to understand the prophets, we'll discover God's consistent character of mercy, his consistent desire that His People

really do achieve what they are meant to achieve in the world.

New Testament: Expectations

And we know that the Minor Prophets were used, right? I mean we saw in Matthew, even at the end of Jesus' life, the way the early church made sense of Jesus being God through the prophets. They made sense out of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection by leaning into the prophets and realizing that much of the future promises God promised through them related to Jesus: He was the prophecy come-true, and the Church began to realize that they themselves were the fulfillment of long-slumbering promises about the future.

They read things like Jeremiah 31:

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord,

***“when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel***

and with the people of Judah.

32 It will not be like the covenant

***I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,***

because they broke my covenant,

***though I was a husband to them,”
declares the Lord.***

33 “This is the covenant I will make with the people of

Israel after that time,” declares the Lord.

***“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.***

***I will be their God,
and they will be my people.***

***34 No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,”
declares the Lord.***

***“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”***

They read this and realized, after a time, that they were the partners of this new covenant. They read a hundred things and realized that Jesus’ faithfulness was what brought it about.

They remembered the prophet Joel’s great future promise, which we’ll talk about, when he said:

***I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.***

***29 Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.***

And the Church connected this with the way Jesus had left them with his own promise that they would “receive power when the Holy Spirit” would come upon them, telling his disciples he had to go, because if he stayed, he couldn’t send the Holy Spirit to them. They experienced the power of the Spirit to break down humanity’s divisions, to give them dreams and visions of how they ought to live. They read the Bible differently, with power, and were able to connect the prophets to what had happened in Jesus’ life and their own formation as God’s People in ways no one had done before.

There is no New Covenant without the old; there is no New Testament without the Old. And God’s work to shepherd His People forward to the day when He could work out all humanity’s redemption, and then empower us, His New Covenant People, to live for him: just so much of it depended on these prophets we’re going to study, not “minor” at all, faithfully carrying out their charge in the world. They kept the faithful remnant of Israel close to God, calling Israel back to their covenant promises until Jesus was born--all that Israel, who was humanity at its most blessed, was ever meant to be.

New Testament: Prophets

And the New Testament is full of the expectation that prophecy isn’t gone in the world. That the Church will have prophets, too: those who foretell and those who forth-tell. Paul tells the church at Corinth to eagerly desire “the greater

gifts,” and includes “prophecy” among it. Those who speak prophetic words speak, we’re told, “to people for their strengthening, encouraging, and comfort.” He says “the one who prophecies builds up the church.”

The early Church had moments where prophets showed up. An entire group of them go to Jerusalem, predict a famine that wreaked havoc on the city, and directed much of Paul’s relief work for the Church there. Later, the leader of that same group preforms a speech-act, binding his feet and hands and telling Paul the same thing, being bound, will happen to him if he returns to Jerusalem. Paul does anyway, but does it eyes wide open. John’s small letters remind us that the same moral and theological tests of a prophet hold.

And if we had time, those of us who have followed the Lord for a long time, have spent time with Christians who embrace the promise Paul gives us, that we ourselves may be gifted with prophecy, could share our experiences of speaking forthrightly, or being spoken to, of having a vision or dream or word for another person that cuts to their heart, or reveals the future, or receiving that from another. It’s a gift for now as much as it was a gift for then, if not a rarer one.

Conclusion:

So what, today, right?

I mean, it’d be nice to, even in an introductory sermon, offer

up, like, some techniques for faithfulness, or, I dunno, a way to avoid some kind of sin that we're not avoiding. Right? Isn't that the point?

I could echo Paul. "Eagerly desire prophecy." I don't know if we do. The idea that God hasn't given up communicating to us directly is something that we simply don't want to embrace, I think. Owning that is our first step to rejecting a lot of shame, a lot of fear, and building up what are meant to be deep structural things that hold up our lives of faith. We aren't meant to be Adam or Eve, hiding from the Lord; we're meant to His Children who run to him as soon as he nears, because he is everything that's safe and good to us, and we know it.

What I want most this morning, really, is our understanding that this genre of writing was borne out of a deeply critical need God's People faced as Israel lived out their covenant role in the world. They needed to hear from God.

We still need to hear from God, as a congregation together, and each of us. And God hasn't given up speaking to us-- whether that's through Scripture, through some other Spirit-filled follower of Jesus, or directly by means of, oh, a vision or a dream or a gut check that we just can't deny, tested against the character and witness of Christ.

We'll be talking, over and over again, about the ways each of

these Minor Prophets ought to impact each of us and all of us together. We'll be challenged enough in the coming weeks.

Today, I'd ask only this:

When was the last time you thought about the prophets?
When was the last time you read about these people, with their powerful, critical calling, and the way their work led all history to Jesus, and has guided the Church even to right now?