

John 1:9-18

1 Kings 22:1-28

## Confessions of a Timid Prophet

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When a pastor loves his people, he doesn't hear or see politics—not really, not when they are sick, not when they are hurting or yearning to grow in their faith.

When a pastor loves her people, she doesn't see race or gender she sees sheep in her flock who need her guidance, she sees precious souls who are in her care for whom she bears responsibility before God. For a soft-hearted relational pastor, all that compassion and love—can get in the way of telling your people the hard truths they need to hear.

*At least that's my excuse and I'm sticking to it.*

I didn't start out aspiring to be a prophet. Remember, in the Bible, prophets weren't fortune tellers per se. They brought the word of God and God's saving history to bear on the present circumstances of God's people. More often than not, prophets offered grim warnings. For instance, a prophet might tell the king and nation: **"IF you persist in each doing your own thing—every man**

**and woman doing what is right in their own eyes instead of what is right in God's eyes—THEN you will find yourselves being forced to do whatever is right in the eyes of the invading Assyrian army and its King."**

Despite all the wonderful press these men get all these years after the fact, prophets were not well loved in their time. Nobody likes to be told that they have drifted into sin; nobody likes to be held accountable; and when it comes to bad news it is easy to confuse the messenger with the message—which happened quite a lot back then. So over time there became two different styles of prophecy.

There were the professional prophets who worked for the King. You might think of them as the equivalent of political appointees. Of course, they still had to go to the right seminaries, and know their Moses frontward and backward to qualify, but they were first and foremost the King and Queen's men, not God's. They tended to be royalists, nationalists, and big supporters of the military industrial complex. They might gently offer the-powers-that-be a carefully worded warning every now and again, but when push came to shove, they knew better to bite the hand that was feeding them.

And then there was usually one or two authentic prophets of God, serving a two point charge in the hinterland. They were often contrary—and came across as judgy and critical. They weren't concerned about the greatness of the nation apart from the nation's faithfulness to God. These prophets called the people and their leaders to heed their better angels, and did not hesitate to explain the consequences of ungodly behavior. Needless to say, they never got invited to parties and if you ever spotted one inside the Royal palace they were party-crashers and not honored guests.

Let me share with you one such tale, as I read it from scripture.

For three years there was no war between Aram and Israel. <sup>2</sup> But in the third year Jehoshaphat king of Judah went down to see the king of Israel. <sup>3</sup> The king of Israel had said to his officials, "Don't you know that Ramoth Gilead belongs to us and yet we are doing nothing to retake it from the king of Aram?"

<sup>4</sup> So he asked Jehoshaphat, "Will you go with me to fight against Ramoth Gilead?"

Jehoshaphat replied to the king of Israel, "I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your

horses.”<sup>5</sup> But Jehoshaphat also said to the king of Israel, “First seek the counsel of the Lord.”

<sup>6</sup> So the king of Israel brought together the prophets—about four hundred men—and asked them, “Shall I go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall I refrain?”

“Go,” they answered, “for the Lord will give it into the king’s hand.”

<sup>7</sup> But Jehoshaphat asked, “Is there no longer a prophet of the Lord here whom we can inquire of?”

<sup>8</sup> The king of Israel answered Jehoshaphat, “There is still one prophet through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. He is Micaiah son of Imlah.”

“The king should not say such a thing,” Jehoshaphat replied.

<sup>9</sup> So the king of Israel called one of his officials and said, “Bring Micaiah son of Imlah at once.”

<sup>10</sup> Dressed in their royal robes, the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah were sitting on their

thrones at the threshing floor by the entrance of the gate of Samaria, with all the prophets prophesying before them. <sup>11</sup> Now Zedekiah son of Kena-ana had made iron horns and he declared, "This is what the Lord says: 'With these you will gore the Arameans until they are destroyed.'"

<sup>12</sup> All the other prophets were prophesying the same thing. "Attack Ramoth Gilead and be victorious," they said, "for the Lord will give it into the king's hand."

<sup>13</sup> The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him, "Look, the other prophets without exception are predicting success for the king. Let your word agree with theirs, and speak favorably."

<sup>14</sup> But Micaiah said, "As surely as the Lord lives, I can tell him only what the Lord tells me."

<sup>15</sup> When he arrived, the king asked him, "Micaiah, shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or not?"

"Attack and be victorious," he answered, "for the Lord will give it into the king's hand."

<sup>16</sup> The king said to him, "How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?"

<sup>17</sup> Then Micaiah answered, "I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd, and the Lord said, 'These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace.'"

<sup>18</sup> The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "Didn't I tell you that he never prophesies anything good about me, but only bad?"

<sup>19</sup> Micaiah continued, "Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne with all the multitudes of heaven standing around him on his right and on his left. <sup>20</sup> And the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?'

"One suggested this, and another that. <sup>21</sup> Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the Lord and said, 'I will entice him.'

<sup>22</sup> "'By what means?' the Lord asked.

"I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouths of all his prophets,' he said.

"'You will succeed in enticing him,' said the Lord. 'Go and do it.'

<sup>23</sup> “So now the Lord has put a deceiving spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The Lord has decreed disaster for you.”

<sup>24</sup> Then Zedekiah son of Kena-anah went up and slapped Micaiah in the face. “Which way did the spirit from<sup>[a]</sup> the Lord go when he went from me to speak to you?” he asked.

<sup>25</sup> Micaiah replied, “You will find out on the day you go to hide in an inner room.”

<sup>26</sup> The king of Israel then ordered, “Take Micaiah and send him back to Amon the ruler of the city and to Joash the king’s son <sup>27</sup> and say, ‘This is what the king says: Put this fellow in prison and give him nothing but bread and water until I return safely.’”

<sup>28</sup> Micaiah declared, “If you ever return safely, the Lord has not spoken through me.” Then he added, “Mark my words, all you people!”

There were those who told the King what he wanted to hear and then there was the one who told the King what God wanted him to hear. It was 400 to 1 back then. I wonder what the ratio is today in most churches?

**I need to confess to you that I have been far too timid a preacher/prophet over the last several years.** I have had nudges and leadings through God's Spirit and through my daily reflection on scripture, but with a few exceptions I haven't shared them with you. I haven't shared them because I've grown extremely fond of all of you and some of you would be tempted to hear the truth God entrusted to me as my opinion. I didn't want to those who were here long before I got here and should be here long after I move on to be unnecessarily offended. I thought some of you might confuse the conviction of the Holy Spirit with political partisanship.

And so I have largely remained silent because I didn't want my sisters and brothers to lose their connection with their church on account of me. In truth, I am the last of the Radical Moderates. I believe truth can almost always be found in tension between two extremes. I love my sisters and brothers who are die-hard progressives. I may not appreciate all the levels of 'wokeness' that go along with their politics, but I don't need to, they are my sisters and brothers. I also love my sisters and brothers who keep a MAGA hat or two in their hall closet. I have found myself at odds more often than

not with President Trump, but I don't have to share their views to appreciate their love for God or their willingness to sacrifice for the sake of their neighbors. \*

**Let me confess my failure to you.**

Though much has been made of President Trump's essential self-centeredness and self-serving approach to leadership, few were as troubled by it as a number of us followers of Jesus. The heart and spirit of Jesus is radically self-giving and self-sacrificing. In other words, the diametric opposite. When human self-centeredness will not give way in the face of God's self-giving grace only pain and tragedy can follow.

The moral leadership which accrues to the Presidency of our nation made the collision between these two spiritual realities inevitable. It's not like scripture minces words about this. It's not like our President only put what is best for himself ahead of what is best for his people once or twice. Add to that the name calling and bullying, as well as the eagerness to embrace anyone willing to praise him—which led him to take up with strange bedfellows, including alt-right militias, white nationalists, and Q Anon Conspiracy theorists. [All that said, we](#)

shouldn't be surprised to see the natural consequences playing out in the chaos and violence that went on in Washington this week.

Probably what convicted me the most is that this man's leadership has made loving our neighbors more difficult than it had been before he took office. He has used anger and outrage—he has used distrust and division to achieve his goals and wield his power. Jesus said, **'You will know each tree by the fruit it bears.'** What we saw happen on Wednesday in hallowed halls of the US Capitol is nothing less than the fruit of overweening vanity and pride.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, **"You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor *can* a bad tree bear good fruit."** I have hoped and prayed, time after time, that this would be the time our President will correct his course, surely now he will repent of his support from white nationalists and recognize his role as the leader of red *and blue states*—his role as President of *the whole country*. I don't know how many second chances you extend out of a desire to put grace first,

but in doing so, I failed to heed the warning Jesus has given: ***A bad tree cannot produce good fruit.***

I hope I didn't go so far as one of Ahab's 400 and only tell you what I thought you wanted to hear. But I didn't want the divisiveness of our national life to divide the bond we have as sisters and brothers in Christ, so I kept those insights I'd been given out of the pulpit.

Some of you might be tempted, even now, to launch into what is a uniquely mainline protestant stance and say, ***'The Church isn't about politics.'*** But please hear me. What I am trying to say isn't about politics. Not if you mean who to vote for or what bill to pass or the best policy solution to solve our collective problems. I'm not talking about any of that. I'm talking about all those things that are rightly NOT POLITICS—those things that get lumped together under the label of “culture wars.” It's a misleading label, of course. What it really describes are the competing visions of the world we want to live in. There is a decidedly biblical, Jesus-centered world view and that, my friends, is not beholden to any one political party or the other. And that, is also territory where your pastors should spend a good deal of their time preaching. **If we are not**

## **guardians of a Jesus fueled vision of the world, then who is?**

One of my hesitations to bring to you the prophetic voice you should have heard is that a lot of our evangelical brothers and sister churches have had a hard time separating the way of Christ with the way of hitching their wagon to one political party.

**Michael Gerson**, chief speechwriter for George W. Bush and syndicated columnist, wrote something this week that reminded me of this all over again. An evangelical himself, he writes about how many of today's church leaders have done grave disservice to our Christian witness to an increasingly unchristian America. He writes:

"And it is not my purpose to pick through the ruins of destroyed reputations. It is tempting to call unforgivable the equation of Christian truth with malice, cruelty, deception, bigotry and sedition. But that statement is itself contradicted by Christian truth, which places no one beyond forgiveness and affirms that everyone needs grace in different ways.

There is a perfectly good set of Christian tools to deal with situations such as these: **remorse, repentance, forgiveness, reformation.** 

The collapse of one disastrous form of Christian social engagement should be an opportunity for the emergence of a more faithful one.

And here there are plenty of potent, hopeful Christian principles lying around unused by most evangelicals:

- A consistent and comprehensive concern for the weak and vulnerable in our society, including the poor, immigrants and refugees.
- A passion for racial reconciliation and criminal justice reform, rooted in the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity.
- A deep commitment to public and global health, reflecting the priorities of Christ's healing ministry.
- An embrace of political civility as a civilizing norm.
- A commitment to the liberty of other people's religions, not just our own.
- An insistence on public honesty and a belief in the transforming power of unarmed truth.<sup>[P]<sub>SEP</sub></sup>

What would America be like if these had been the priorities of evangelical Christians over the past four years — or over the past four decades?

I find it a challenging and uncomfortable question. It sounds like Gerson is not afraid to be a prophet even if it is in a secular newspaper column.

This last Wednesday a large crowd, egged on by our President stormed the nation's capitol in an effort to at best intimidate at worst do violence to Congressional leaders as they tallied electoral votes, prior to the upcoming inauguration of President-elect Biden.

- They planted at least 2 Explosive devices, uncovered a number of Molotov cocktails
- Rioters broke windows doors, ripped off name plates, looting congressional offices.
- Every kind of Hate Symbols was on display—white power gestures, a noose, confederate flags, anti-Semitic t-shirts and signs.
- Once in, they posed disrespectfully and desecrated the altar of American democracy
- They beat law enforcement with lead pipes and fire extinguishers, killed one officer and injured 50 others, some seriously.

**This is the final fruit born by this tree.**

**And I let that fruit ripen in silence because I loved any number of you too much and I loved the truth too little.** I didn't trust you. I didn't trust

the strength of our relationship with one another--or maybe I didn't trust the durability of your faith in Christ to tell you what I was discerning, what the scriptures were saying to me in my study, what the Holy Spirit was nudging me to speak up about in the middle of the night. And for that I owe you an apology. For that I have my own responsibility to own up to.

Now it may occur to you that I can preach like this because this is my second to last sermon before I move south. And yes, that's probably so. Just further evidence of my cowardice, I suppose. **But let's pretend that it's more than that. Just for the moment, let's say that I want Trinity to continue to grow and thrive under Pastor Karen, Bryan and Lori's leadership,** and if sharing what I have shared with you today makes it a little easier for them to bring a convicting word from God, then it was worth giving up the warm, heart-felt sermon I'd been planning to preach right up to Wednesday afternoon.

**Let me close this morning by offering the following suggestions, based upon our biblical faith.**

- Please **do what you can to separate the messenger and the message** if only to better

discern where the message comes from. Great preaching comforts the afflicted but it also afflicts the comfortable. Both are important for growing disciples of Christ.

- Feel free to disagree with your pastors, but please find a way to do so without being disagreeable.
- What made a false prophet a false prophet was telling the king only what he wanted to hear. Please, please, please. **Don't trust anyone who only tells you what you already want to hear.** To do so for any length of time almost guarantees that there will be less and less truth in it.
- **Partisanship does not have a place in the pulpit.** But politics in the broadest sense about the moral use of power either for or against the greater good—that, my brothers and sisters, is always fair game for the word of God. **It certainly was for Jesus.** He wasn't crucified for preaching about forgiveness or healing too many sick. He was killed because his very presence threatened those who were in power—in both Judea and in Rome. He threatens them and us still, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Forgive me for not sharing with you as truthfully and boldly as I might have what God has been sharing with me in my study week after week. The fault is mine and not yours. But I do ask one thing from you going forward. **Pray that the Lord might give me the courage to worry less about offending my people and more about sharing the beauty and power of His word—just as plainly and boldly as He has shared it with me. Here in Elkhart, in Carmel, or wherever I am given the privilege to preach His gospel. Amen.**

**Benediction:**

It never really caught on, but one of my favorite benedictions was to remind us who we are as we go back out there into the world.

**At Trinity we are kind and we are encouraging.**

**We are always looking to connect with lost and hurting people, So that through us they might get connected to Jesus and his church.**

Doesn't sound very ambitious, but if each of us could do live those words out each day, we would turn Elkhart County upside down.

\* It's funny, really. When I was a college student, I did a month long internship in a Disciples of Christ congregation in Greencastle, Indiana with a pastor that I really admired and thought I could learn from. I remember some issue at the time and when I asked him how he was going to address it, his response was something less than tepid. I urged him to 'let his people have it' with the word of God. He smiled and said that it wasn't that simple. When I asked him, "Why?" he said because it's hard to do that to people when you've helped bury their spouse, or watch them struggle with alcoholism, or know that they've just lost their job. I clearly remember thinking at the time that the truth of God is the truth of God if you can't handle it, then repent and get right with Jesus. I secretly marked him down as wishy-washy. I had all the righteous superiority of someone who didn't know his head from a hole in the ground.

And now I find myself chief among sinners in that regard for many of the same reasons. I wonder now, if a timid prophet is any use at all to a decisive and commanding God.

## IF

The biggest obstacle in your life today could be one of the smallest words in the English language.

So many times we blame everyone and everything else for our situation, when the problem is this little two letter word. And that word is 'IF'

I'll give my life to Jesus, IF (fill in the blank).

How often this word stands in the way of our obedience to God.

I would like to share Jesus with people at my job, IF...

I'd more generous with God, IF...

I would enter into the worship today, IF...

I'd spend more time with my kids, IF...

I would go on that missions trip, IF...

I'd start treating my wife better, IF...

God, I'll really start serving you, IF...

- By adding IF...we make excuses, we bargain with God, we set conditions for our obedience, or try to shift the responsibility to others.
- The word IF implies that God needs to do more to hold up His end of the bargain.

He has already done what we need most.

“While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. ”

Jesus didn't die for us based on IF, He died for us BECAUSE...

- BECAUSE God loves us with an unquenchable love,
- BECAUSE God refuses to turn His back on us,
- BECAUSE we are God's precious sons and daughters,
- BECAUSE we've been given everything we need, to become everything God needs us to be.

Let's not obey God IF...Let's obey Him BECAUSE...,

Let's love God BECAUSE...

Let's lose the **IF** right here and now, **BECAUSE** with our God all things are possible.

Let's enter into worship this morning **BECAUSE** our God is worthy of our praise & honor.