

Preaching the Prophets for Lent

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Lent is a time for introspection and spiritual candor. Believers are to acknowledge our complicity in the deep brokenness of the world, seek to amend our lives, and wait in hope for the healing grace of our God. The preacher guiding a congregation through Lent would do well to consider ways in which the ancient Hebrew prophets can assist in Lenten spiritual formation. This may need to be accomplished with some creativity in lectionary-based churches, for regrettably, the Revised Common Lectionary does not claim the prophets as essential witnesses during Lent. Isaiah, of course, has always been a treasure trove for the Church and is richly represented: lections from Isaiah are used on Ash Wednesday, three Sundays in Lent, and throughout in Holy Week. But apart from Isaiah, the prophets are read seldom in Lent. Just one reading from Jeremiah is assigned to a Lenten Sunday. Ezekiel is read on Lent 5A and at the Easter Vigil, Joel is read on Ash Wednesday, and Zephaniah is read at the Easter Vigil. Otherwise, the Revised Common Lectionary does not provide for hearing of the biblical prophetic witness during Lent.

Yet the corpus of the biblical prophets offers a wealth of resources for the Scripturally-grounded preacher seeking to offer Lenten instruction, remonstrance, exhortation, or proclamation. The prophets challenge us to trust the deep purposes of God even when those purposes are not transparent to us or to our faith communities. The prophets call us to the practice of social justice as constitutive of the redeemed community, continually lifting up the poor, the powerless, and others whom our social and religious structures tend to forget. Beckoning to us and haranguing us, the prophets implore us to assent to the reality of God's covenantal love despite the fears, threats, and temptations that fracture our lives.

Prologue

How might the preacher effectively engage the prophets as formative for Lenten discipleship? A preliminary note of caution is in order. Christians should not assume that we may cheerfully take the stance of the prophet over against political leaders or "sinners" construed as folks other than us. Lent is not the time for over-confident believers to reach for the prophetic mantle. The prophets certainly did speak against political, social, and clerical exploitation of others. But a fearless moral and spiritual inventory needs to be undertaken within our own hearts and in our communities before we dare to speak words of judgment to others. Lent is a time of humility. We must not take our stand next to Amos and thunder, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24) until we have first understood just how fully we ourselves are convicted by that prophetic word.

Amos can help here. The book of Amos uses devastating irony throughout in order to undermine the smugness of Israelite leaders and people alike. Amos sets a brutal trap with his opening oracles against foreign nations. The implied audience's glee turns to horror as those to be punished by God file by—the Arameans, the Philistines, Tyre, the Edomites, the despised Ammonites and Moabites—for we see none

other than Judah and Israel at the end of the line! Amos savagely deploys his people's beloved Exodus traditions against them: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth," God roars, "therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (3:1-2). God will pass through the midst of God's people once again, but this time God will not spare (5:17).

With regard to that cherished oracle, "Let justice roll down like waters," used to stirring effect by Martin Luther King Jr. in the civil rights struggle and deployed with regularity by seminarians in their preaching classes, we would do well to recognize that Amos was not talking about the gentle burbling of a brook of divine justice. The topography of Israel is relevant: that dusty desert land has seasonal dry stream beds that are subject to powerful flash floods. Moments after a rain, with no warning, water can pour through those channels at flood stage, sweeping away everything in its path. "Ever-flowing stream" is far too bucolic and pleasant for what Amos had in mind. The Hebrew phrase *nahal 'etan* is better rendered, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a *permanent flash flood*." God's righteousness cannot be contained, cannot be commodified for a particular theological bent or a particular social platform. "I hate, I despise your festivals," the God of Amos rages. "Take away from me the noise of your songs!" We are all at risk: Christian educators and liturgical leaders who are certain that church could not take place without them, acolytes who elbow others aside to polish the brass, choir members who thrill to their own performance of impressive motets, and every preacher who likes to think that she herself gets to "be" Amos. No: we stand convicted before the mighty Amos and his God.

We have fruitful and important spiritual work to do before we can speak an authentic prophetic word. During Lent, the preacher may consider the process of engaging the prophetic literature to be helpful in teaching congregations not to be arrogant about their own theological rhetoric, nor fetishistic about their liturgical practices, nor smug about their social-justice commitments. In what follows, I will use three prophetic texts to guide us into dimensions of prophetic literature that can provide rich resources for Christian formation during Lent.

1. *Grace*

First, consider covenant as means of God's grace. God is continually extending to Israel the promise of covenant — not just back in the dust of ancient history, of course, but even today through God's holy Word continually offered in Scripture to every believer and seeker. This is a holy word, and thus an invitation, that endures forever (Isa 40:8). God spoke creation into existence with the all-powerful Word (Genesis 1 and John 1). Our Creator is a terrifying God who causes the earth to quake and the heavens to pour down rain when marching through the southern desert (Psalm 68), who speaks on Sinai through thunder, lightning, smoke, and the blast of apocalyptic trumpets (Exodus 19). We should run in terror from this God! We should try to hide in the cleft of a rock from the death-dealing majesty of this Creator (Exodus 33)! We dare to *seek* this terrifying God only because Scripture tells us of God's compassion and grace. The stories and oracles and hymns of Scripture insist on God's yearning for covenant relationship with those whom God has made.

Covenants abound in the Hebrew Scriptures. God chose the wily Chaldean migrant Abram to be a blessing for all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3) and to model

faith for all who believe (Gen 15:6; Romans 4; Gal 3:6-9). God chose the impulsive trickster Jacob to encourage the spiritual wrestling that is essential to mature faith (Gen 32:22-32). God chose the unprepossessing Moses to lead an enslaved ethnic minority group to freedom at the foot of Sinai. God chose the young shepherd David, who would be hailed as a paradigm of spiritual loyalty and despised as a ruthless mercenary. There are many refractions of Israel's covenant traditions. But even in the exquisite cultural chaos that swirls around the varied narrations of patriarchal covenants, the competing priestly and Deuteronomistic articulations of God's requirements, and the sharply divergent appraisals of David in Scripture, we can know one thing for a certainty: God chooses. God calls, and we respond.

One of the earliest echoes of covenantal tradition may be heard in the tumultuous and rhetorically violent book of the prophet Hosea. Hosea knows Israel's foundational traditions, and knowledge of God is a crucially important motif in that book. We glimpse some of the Decalogue in Hosea 4 (where the earth languishes because "swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out," v 2). The wilderness wandering is a motif in Hosea (9:10-11). Hosea 11 is an agonized reflection on God's calling of Israel out of Egypt. Where Hosea is innovative is in his extended use of a powerful metaphor of disrupted family relationships to portray the connection between God and God's people. In Hosea 1-3, Israel is figured as Gomer, a prostitute whom the prophet loves and against whose infidelity he rages. Israel is also metaphorized as the children of Hosea and Gomer, little Lo-Ammi and Lo-Ruhamah, who look on in horror as the prophet and his God threaten to destroy the faithless mother. Through this extended metaphor, we are drawn into the passionate violence of God's rage at Israel's faithlessness. Hosea's rhetoric shows us a God who is hyperbolically angry and abusive, who roars that he will strip Israel and expose her, kill her with thirst, lay waste her vineyards and fig trees. "Israel" in Hosea 2 is both a battered, shamed woman and a desolated land. God will put an end to both Israel's economic viability and her participation in liturgical festivals; she will be left destitute and bereft of cultic means to seek restoration.

These images and the enraged tone of Hosea 2 have been deeply disturbing to readers over the centuries. The entire book of Hosea is roiled by vivid language of shaming, beating, killing, miscarriage, and evisceration. Ephraim will be oppressed and crushed, trapped as an animal and trapped metaphorically in the womb, punished relentlessly with God's fire and plague and the tumult of war. And there is no relief in turning to God—that is, not until the end of the book of Hosea. For Hosea, God is not only an enraged battering spouse; God is "like maggots to Ephraim, and like rotteness to the house of Judah" (5:12), "like a lion to Ephraim and like a young lion to the house of Judah," one that will "tear and carry off" with none to rescue (5:14). God brutalizes the people with their own words of sacred tradition, saying of this sinful people who try to manipulate the divine favor, "I have hewn them by the prophets; I have killed them by the words of my mouth" (6:5). God is a ruthless hunter who will cast a net over this people and bring them down (7:12); God will butcher the "cherished offspring" of Israel's womb (9:16) and cause pregnant women to be eviscerated (13:16); God will "fall upon [God's people] like a bear robbed of her cubs," tearing open the covering of their heart, devouring them like a lion, mangling them like a wild animal (13:8).

Hosea names his people's transgressions not only through the prostitute metaphor,

but also through a cartography of geographical references to towns and sites associated with Israel's history of idolatry, especially in instances of sexualized transgression. Named in this book are the Valley of Jezreel, the Valley of Achor, Gilgal, Beth-Aven, Mizpah, Tabor, Shittim, Gibeah, Ramah, Adam, Gilead, Shechem, Baal-Peor, Beth-Arbel, Bethel, Admah, and Zebaiim. Almost all of these places are associated with a transgression of Israel that has been connected, in Israel's tradition history, with sexualized or other boundary-crossing sin. Thus Hosea constructs his audience's past in a particular way that focuses on the scandal of his people's persistent faithlessness. Through his relentless cartography of Israel's past sin and his dramatically disturbing images, Hosea leaves his audience nowhere to turn—the prophet seeks to shock, to disrupt the smugness of a people that did not understand what was at stake in their spurning of the covenant with God.

So it stuns us when Hosea's God says, "Out of Egypt I have called my son," going on to use tender maternal imagery to characterize God's relationship with baby Ephraim. The compassion of God throws us off guard here, precisely as it's meant to do. Standing with Israel, we have been constructed as an unrepentant prostitute, as her forlorn and anxious children, as hardhearted, impure, and bent on idolatry. We as God's people deserve absolutely nothing, according to Hosea's narration of our identity. Our arrogance, our misguided and willful sinfulness, should rightly call forth only God's wrath and our own obliteration.

Yet God calls us. God chooses us. And God loves us.

We hear in Hosea 11 that Ephraim is God's beloved child: taught by God to walk, nursed tenderly by God. Ephraim deserves condemnation, rejection, punishment; but instead, Hosea shows us God's overflowing compassion for the child of God's own heart. "How can I give you up, O Ephraim?" God sighs. "How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath" (11:8-9).

If the violent rhetoric of Hosea had disrupted believers' insistent infidelities and stubborn cultural idolatries, well, this language of unmerited compassion disrupts something too. It disrupts the rigid Deuteronomistic calculus that weighs out human sin and divine response on the scales of conditional love. In fact, God is not like us, not about the business of vengeance. The Holy One in our midst does not repay in kind. "I am God and no mortal," God sings. Here in Hosea 11 we learn of God's unconditional love, undeserved by ancient Israel and undeserved by us as well. Here we learn of grace.

It is only by the grace of God that we survive our own sinfulness, battered and skewered and ripped open as we have been by the traumatizing rhetoric of Hosea. Hosea's scandalous and violent imagery orphans us—destroys our faithless mother, as the prophet threatens to do in Hosea 2 and also Hosea 4, where the prophet rages that "[the priest] will stumble by day, the prophet also shall stumble with you by night, and I will destroy your mother" (4:5). This "mother" narrated by Hosea is an adulterous prostitute, a faithless people whose idolatrous reliance on themselves and on foreign allies must be deconstructed if Israel is to understand who God is. Shaken and bruised by Hosea's rhetoric, we finally find out who God truly is at the very end of the book, in Hosea 14. "I will be like the dew to Israel," promises the real God who loves this people; "I am like an evergreen cypress." Israel will blossom like the lily,

will strike root like the forests of Lebanon, flourishing as a garden under the shade of God's protection. Israel's fruit comes—has always come—only from this God of grace.

It is through the initiative of the gracious love of God that we have been called out of slavery, out of idolatry, and out of our places of wilderness into relationship with our Redeemer. Many of our sacred Scriptures speak of God's mercy and grace. But there is no book of the entire Bible that presses the Gospel claim of grace more vividly and powerfully than does the book of the prophet Hosea. While preachers can always explore the history of Christian interpretation to consider ways in which Hosea and Gomer represent Christ and the Church, we may also recognize in Hosea a risky but valuable resource that goes deeper than christological proof-texting. Christians may engage this disturbing and brilliant book, both in its surface content and in its deconstructive dynamics, as an important means of formation for discipleship. Hosea helps us to feel, on a visceral level, the urgent stakes of covenantal relationship and the intense drama of God's grace. The preacher dare not replicate Hosea's brutal dynamics from the pulpit, of course. That would be homiletically irresponsible and could do harm to the congregation, especially to those who are survivors of trauma. But with care and pastoral sensitivity, the preacher can help make visible to the congregation the urgency of covenantal fidelity and our desperate need for God's grace.

2. *Dying to Self*

The self-examination required by Lent raises the pastoral question of how the preacher may work effectively with the longings, wounded places, and struggles of the congregation, including family histories, communal gifts and trauma, and other dimensions of who they are as believers. Christian vocation is demanding, and we bring our whole selves—woundedness and all—to the enterprise. Our Lord asks that we take up our cross daily and follow Him. In all of Scripture, there is no better resource for exploring the cost of vocation than the book of Jeremiah.

The commissioning of this prophet was a plan of God from long before Jeremiah took his place among the priests at Anathoth. The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Psalm 139 confirms this theology: God knows every word before we utter it; in God's book are written all the days that are formed for us, before they even exist. God knows us more intimately than we can possibly know ourselves, and God knows for what God has made us. Our moments of learning and struggle, our transcendent moments of joy, and our darkest moments of fear: everything that makes up the life of the believer is already known to God. Discernment, then, is a matter of listening deeply, of attending to what God already knows about us but we have hidden, denied, misunderstood, or simply do not yet know about ourselves and the vocations we are to live out.

But what God has prepared for us is not necessarily easy. And so Jeremiah struggles. Yielding to vocation can feel like being overpowered, especially if the ministry or witness to which believers are called leads them into places of antagonism and conflict. Jeremiah had to speak hard words to his people. He had to tell them that *shalom* was not to be theirs, that their leaders and seers could not save them, that their future held exile and death. Jeremiah is compelled by his God to be a prophet of doom—he is forbidden to intercede on behalf of his people, and he is wracked by the anguish of

his mission. He laments, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Why . . . has the health of my poor people not been restored? O that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!" (8:22-9:1). Jeremiah rages, knowing that his life is under threat by his own people at Anathoth, seeing that corrupt priests and royal officials are stubbornly refusing to heed the word of the LORD.

The Word of God is for Jeremiah the cause and source of his suffering, but he is compelled to speak. God's truth is "like a burning fire shut up in the bones" of the prophet, something he cannot hold in no matter what derision or torment he may face as a result of his truth-telling. Jeremiah must give up his hope of having a normal life—he may not have a wife, he will never know the joy of children (Jeremiah 16). He cannot hope for the support of friends and family in his lonely sentinel position, watching on the ramparts as God's terrible purposes unfold; he senses that all of his friends are waiting for an opportunity to harm him (20:10). The depth of his bitterness may be discerned in the way in which Jeremiah seeks to erase himself from his own life: "Cursed be the day on which I was born! . . . Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?" (20:14-18).

Jeremiah must die to self in order to fulfil God's call to discipleship. The wrenching pain of it can be seen not only in the prophet's laments but in the fractured struggles of the book of Jeremiah writ larger, a book riven by bitter disagreements about God's plan, the role of Babylon, and what faithfulness means in a city and a culture under siege. Vocation is lived out incarnationally, and not only in the person and body of Jeremiah. Vocation is lived out—and contested—in the social body of Judah and in the historicized and ritualized "body" of ancient Israel as that body is drawn, erased, and redrawn by means of Israel's sacred traditions. Jeremiah writhes in anguish, and Judah writhes along with him—both the Judeans present in the terrible sixth-century Babylonian onslaught and others who have stood with that community and read its story in future generations.

And so when Jeremiah writhes and Judah writhes, it is fair to say that the Church writhes. We, too, are unsettled and anguished and displaced as we witness and participate in the cost of that discipleship. Reading the book of Jeremiah, staying present to its fear and not shrinking from its vitriolic conflicts, we glimpse what may be required if we are to die to ourselves so that we may be reborn in Christ. The life of faith is far from harmonious. Vision is not always clear. Believers of goodwill can disagree fiercely over how to move forward toward God's purposes. Jeremiah witnesses to the whole complex and agonized truth of lived and living discipleship, both of the prophet and of the beloved community.

Christian interpretive tradition offers a richness of christological readings of the man Jeremiah as a type of Christ and Jeremiah's suffering as a proleptic foreshadowing of Christ's Passion. I honor those christological readings but would urge the preacher to consider the formational power of encountering the whole book of Jeremiah: not just the lyrical passage in Jeremiah 31 about the new covenant written on the heart, but also the book's fierce contestations and anxieties. We cannot read Jeremiah and continue to hold a cavalier view about the obvious propositional rightness of this or that social or political position in today's Church. Justice and holiness are complicated things, as every pastor knows. With Jeremiah, we see the brokenness of community. In the polyphony of the book of Jeremiah, we hear stirring prophetic proclamation,

yes, but also resistance and struggle and despair. Staying present to that is a crucially important gift and witness that Jeremiah offers to the Church.

3. *Newness of Life in Community*

Finally, Lent invites us to consider the reformation of the believing community. Faithful reading involves being attentive not only to the content of Scripture—its propositions and claims and images—but to its poetics and narratology, its ironic and paradoxical gestures, its rhetorical artistry, and the dynamics of deconstruction and revisioning and contestation that enliven Scriptural witness as a whole. The preacher's biblical pedagogy from the pulpit is funded by the truth that every process of engaging Scripture faithfully is superintended by the Holy Spirit. Now, can particular readings miss the mark, be self-serving or distorted or theologically inadequate? Of course. But even in those instances, even in our hermeneutical moments of failed vision or unwitting narcissism or simple misunderstanding, we are seeking God through God's holy and life-giving word. In the faithful and courageous ongoing engagement of the biblical prophets, we are taking a tremendous risk as individual believers and as communities of faith. The prophetic Word of God will convict us and disturb our idolatries; it will fire our imaginations in ways that will leave us perpetually dissatisfied with the status quo; it will require that we dare to be open to the Otherness of God and the strangeness of each other in communities that stretch across cultures and across millennia.

An excellent resource within Scripture for thinking about God's continual reformation of community is Isaiah 56. The book of Isaiah constitutes a marvelous multi-layered witness that responds to several historical contexts, from the eighth century through the post-exilic period. Isaiah 56 is a key text in the post-exilic community's wrestling with who they are called to be. Framed by the opening call to justice ("Maintain justice and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come," 56:1) and the closing indictment of Israel's blind sentinels and drunken shepherds—false prophets and exploitative rulers—are some extraordinary verses about a newly expansive and courageous community. The community reformed in God's purposes invites into the ranks of worshippers the despised eunuchs and foreigners who had been prohibited, according to Deuteronomy 23, from worshipping with Israel. "Thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths . . . and hold fast my covenant I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off" (56:4-5). And foreigners who keep the sabbath will be brought by God to God's holy mountain (56:7); their offerings will be accepted, for—Isaiah's God thunders—"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

A monument and a name (*yad vashem*) better than sons and daughters: this is not grudging acceptance, "tolerance," or any of those tepid ways that communities have of signaling that someone may join them so long as they don't seem too "different." "Better than sons and daughters" means a radical reconfiguring of the community at its core. The stranger is to be invited into the very heart of what community means! The life of the community depends on the *yad vashem* of the foreigner and the eunuch. A staggering claim, and deeply moving when we consider the horrific ways in which believers of many traditions have worked for so many centuries to silence and exterminate the Other from their midst. Those who have visited Jerusalem in recent

decades may have been to the Holocaust memorial outside of the city. It is a place of excruciatingly important witness. This memorial throws a searching light on the unspeakable brutality of those who commanded the genocide of Europe's Jews and other marginalized populations. But more than that, it testifies to the indescribable preciousness of the Other, the one who will never be "like us" and whose need is our most urgent ethical concern, according to Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas. The name of that Holocaust memorial? Yad Vashem. A name that will not be cut off, no matter what, no matter how despised the Other might have been . . . whether despised in the dusty streets of post-exilic Yehud, or despised on a hill called Golgotha in first-century Palestine, or despised today in congregations across this country that are still made too anxious by difference to welcome every single person or couple that crosses the threshold.

Isaiah calls us to newness of life in community—to life superintended by a Holy Spirit whose vision can never be constrained by human agendas. This is a scary thing, because it means that "we" will be remade along with "them." We will be configured and reformed in ways that testify to who God is—the Holy One of Israel, God and no mortal!—rather than testifying to that about which we are most smug or which makes us feel safest. And it is only in the sustained engagement of the prophetic corpus, and indeed all of Scripture, that we will hear this word of newness in something even beginning to approach fullness. If we've read Deuteronomy 23 with its forceful exclusion of some from the worshipping congregation, and we've pondered the book of Ruth with its Moabite protagonist, we will hear Isaiah 56 more clearly, and we will hear the Suffering Servant Songs of the book of Isaiah more richly, and we can begin to understand more of the scandal and promise of Jesus Christ. Lent is an ideal time for the preacher to foster such hermeneutical engagement.

Conclusion

Preachers may invite their congregations into the witness of the prophets in myriad ways. Preaching can make visible the ways in which we wrestle and submit, plead and rage and cower and rejoice in our encounters with this holy Word through which breathes the living Word that is Christ. The congregation can be beckoned into covenantal fidelity in its Scripture-reading practices. Preachers can look for the incarnational truth-telling and suffering of God's prophetic people and glimpse there the Son of God, broken on the Cross and resurrected in glory for the sake of the world. If we are brave, we may allow the prophetic word to invite and cajole and browbeat us into newness of life in community and thereby open our hearts to the radical action of the Holy Spirit. All this is to say, preachers can invite their congregations to learn how we are formed and reformed as we read together. Unmerited grace, dying to self, newness of life in community: all are there in the Hebrew Scriptures. As we begin to understand more deeply the truth of this ancient Word that stands forever (Isa 40:8), then and only then might we dare whisper with Amos, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."