

Sermon: Turning into Prophets

Year B, Epiphany 4

[Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28](#)

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I grew up in downtown Andover, which is a bit like growing up in downtown Brookline with a few more shops. I could walk to the library and to school and to church. And there weren't many other places to walk to. Our house had a driveway that was two car lengths long. We had a shoveling system. My sister and I would shovel from the head of the driveway towards the street. Dad would start in the street and shovel towards the house. One morning, I must have been in 4th or 5th grade, I woke up early for some reason. I thought I'd be really good and shovel the heavy stuff at the end of the driveway. Dad came out a short while later and sent me back to the head of the driveway. He said: It wasn't safe down in the road. The cars couldn't see me, the plow drivers had been out all night, the snow was really heavy.

He did not say, would never say, what his actions taught me. He would do the heavy lifting of any project we did together. He knew better than I how to listen for trouble. He was going to stand between me and danger. Was Dad being a snow shoveling prophet? Well if being a prophet is seeing under the current reality and getting a better view into the future because of it, I would say he was. His words are no longer true: I am stronger than he is, with better hearing and more agility to get out of the way of car. But his actions are still the case: he will stand between me and danger always. So every time I'm in Maine and it snows, we argue over who is going to clear the street end of the driveway.

Today's reading from Deuteronomy gives us an idea of why there are prophets at all. As they fled captivity in Egypt, the Israelites were terrified when God addressed them directly. So they asked God to send prophets. God agreed, provided the people listened to the prophets. The word in Hebrew means both "listen" and "pay attention" (how many parents agree that they are not the same thing?). God agreed that the prophets would come from the community, that the prophets would understand the community's longing and brokenness.

But if the role of the prophets is to look under the current reality and see the future more clearly because of that, then we need a way to choose between true and false prophets. Because all sorts of people in our community seem to be pointing in wildly different directions.

Today's reading from Deuteronomy gives us two tests. The first one sounds easy: if the prophet speaks of other gods, then the prophet is false. In the Super Bowl later today, you'll probably get bored with counting all the other gods that show up, all the food and fashion and cars and drugs and TV shows that need to be consumed if you're going to live a good life. Still, those other gods can sometimes sound pretty compelling, so some of those false prophets can slide by unnoticed.

The other test from Deuteronomy is also clear on the face of it: if God strikes them dead, they were a false prophet. But God strikes all of us dead at one point or another. Think of last week's worship service and all the people who opposed Rev. King. Many of the people who preached that Jim Crow would live forever are being proven wrong, yet many of them are still alive.

So there have to be some other ways of telling when a prophet is true. If God is telling the prophet what to say and the prophet is saying it, then surely we can check on a prophet by seeing if what they say about the future comes true.

So let's think about Jonah. God sent him to Nineveh. Jonah ran the other way. God sent a storm and a whale (as if the storm was not enough) to redirect him. Jonah got to Nineveh. He told the people of Nineveh, "Forty more days and Nineveh shall be destroyed." Nineveh repented. Here's my question: was Jonah a true prophet?

Sure, it's kind of a trick question. He was a lousy predictor of what was coming. But he got folks to reflect on where they were heading and to turn around. Some part of being a true prophet, then, is getting people to turn back to God. What he said really wasn't convincing. But he was a guy who had been actively heading away from God, who had been so determined that it took a huge storm and a huge fish to get him back on track, and there he was in the heart of enemy territory, serving his God. It can't have been what Jonah said that was so compelling. It had to be what he did.

In today's reading from Mark, the people worshipping with Jesus were amazed by his teaching. What he said was "be silent, and come out of him!" We all know people who would really benefit from a lesson about being silent. But it was what Jesus did, forcing that demon to leave the man who had been afflicted, that amazed them.

Jesus was just at the start of his ministry. He was in his home town. He took this action and someone's life changed direction. Initially, to the people around him, he must have felt like a prophet. He was one of them, someone who knew their longing and their brokenness. He used the power he got from God to challenge the authority of all the people who had permission to heal the man with the demon but who hadn't done it.

At the beginning of Advent, we looked at the first chapter of Luke, where Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem and Jesus is born. We talked then about how the start of a story tells you something about how the story is going to go. Today's Gospel reading is from the first chapter of Mark. This exorcism is the first miracle that Mark describes. Jesus' action showed that someone was not broken forever, that someone could be healed and returned to their community. Jesus' action showed that no one had to be kept outside the community, that they could be brought inside it. His words didn't say that. His actions did.

Think of all those dads at the end of all those driveways. Think of all the people who loved you and what they did for you. Think of all the people you love and what you do for them. In Hebrew, the word "prophet" means "the One who is Called" and "the One who Calls." It's a nice ambiguity. Sometimes we call with our words, "Forty Days More and Nineveh shall be destroyed." Sometimes we call with our actions, with all the shoveling and Sunday School teaching and cooking for take home meals and bringing treats for coffee hour.

It can be hard to hear what God is saying to us. Sometimes it sounds so much like what we wish were true that we don't trust it. Sometimes it sounds so much like what we're sure we can't possibly do that we run the other way and end up inside a whale. During Lent I'm going work with the church leadership to set up a half day retreat here at the church focused on discernment, on listening to what God is saying to each of us and through each of us. Before we can say what God is asking us to say, before we can do, we need to listen, to pay attention.

Sometimes prophecy shows up in the doing, not in the saying. When we stop heading away from God and get back on the track towards God, we are turning into prophets. Our every day actions of kindness and prayer, of looking beyond someone's demons to the person underneath, of sitting with someone as they struggle with their demons. We are all turning into prophets when we listen to God's voice speaking in our hearts and when we acknowledge that God is speaking to other people's hearts at the same time. We promised to listen to the prophets God sent. Even when we are those prophets.