

Sermon: Perplexed Yet Listening

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, St Giles PC joint service, July 11, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Back in my seminary days at Knox College, in 2005 I think, Daisy and I met a prophet—well, someone who was recognized and acclaimed as a prophet of God. We were serving and worshipping regularly at an evangelical congregation in Toronto at that time. The minister of the congregation had invited this so-called prophet to preach on a particular Sunday. After the service, the prophet was to have one-on-one time with members of the congregation, to speak “a word from the Lord” to each individual. There was a long line up, many had wanted to hear from the prophet. They were instructed to each bring a tape recorder, to preserve whatever was spoken, I supposed for later edification.

For a host of different reasons I won't get into, Daisy and I found ourselves the first in line. Daisy had want to hear from the prophet, I didn't. So I stood a short distance, an earshot away, bowed my head and prayed. The prophet spoke to Daisy, then turned to me inquiring if I was interested to hear ‘a word from the Lord’. I politely declined and explained that I was only praying so whatever were said was indeed from God, not from some other nefarious sources.

Somehow, perhaps out of nervousness, Daisy could not remember at all what the prophet said to her. Somehow, the tape recorder malfunctioned so nothing was recorded that day. To this day, I thank God for sparing us, from the words of that so-called prophet. (True story! I can't make this up.)

Prophets or *navi-im* in Hebrew, have long played a crucial role in the political/religious life of Israel. Ever since Moses, the prophet par-excellence, the Lord God have always raised up prophets from among the people of God, to speak the words of the Lord. Though prophets do speak of the future, of things unknown and wonders yet to be revealed, the primary purpose of biblical prophets was to bring the people of God back to the path of righteousness, back to the way of the Lord.

*Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint;
Where there is no vision, the people perish .*

(Proverbs 29:18, NRSV and KJV).

The vision of Amos in chapter 7 illustrates precisely such a point. Amos did not go to a prophet school, nor was he a prophet's son. He was a simple herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees. Then the Lord showed him a series

of three visions, of locust devouring the land, of fire devouring the deep and of the Lord standing by a wall.

The wall was built with אָנַךְ ('anakh) in Hebrew, with אָנַךְ ('anakh) in the Lord's hand. And the Lord said to the prophet, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "אָנַךְ ('anakh)" (v.7-8). The traditional interpretation of these verses (reflected in many English translations) assumed that אָנַךְ meant "lead." Since lead might be used for a plumb line, and a plumb line might be used when building wall, the "lead" wall was assumed to be a wall built "true to plumb" while God holds a "lead" weighted plumb line in his hand.

However, translators and commentators of the Net Bible have advanced a number of other possible interpretations. The most interesting one being that of a sound play: אָנַךְ ('anakh) is close to how a second person masculine singular suffix would sound — אַתָּה ('atakh), so translated as the direct address of 'you'. In such an understanding, then verse 8 takes on a different, more of an added meaning. *Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting not just a plumb line but you, I am setting you in the midst of my people Israel, I will never again pass them by."* Amos was the plumb line. The mere presence of the prophet of God in the midst of the people of God represents a standard of evaluation of the judgement of God.

John the Baptist (or some call the baptizer) also played the role of a plumb line, in his generation. As prophesied by Isaiah, John was the voice crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepared the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'. So he appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Following the tradition of the Nazarite, as one who was consecrated to the service of God, John was clothed with camel's hair, with a letter bet around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. People from the whole Judean countryside and of all the Jerusalem were going out to him, baptized by him in the river Jordan, including Jesus. Even before the ministry of Jesus got started, John was already recognized and acclaimed as the prophet of the Lord.

Yet, just as many prophets before him, speaking truth to power was and is a dangerous endeavour, exercised at one's own risk. In John's case, the power he confronted was Herod Antipas, son of King Herod the Great.

The author of Mark was overtly generous in calling him a king, because Antipas was never given such a title, not by the Roman authority (though he tried repeatedly), nor by the Jewish people. Antipas was in fact a tetrarch, put in charge of Galilee and Perea, ruler of a quarter of his late father's kingdom, a convoluted arrangement resulting from an incredibly dysfunctional family with an hyper-paranoid father whose grip on the kingdom extended beyond his own grave. Although Antipas was already married to Phasaelis, the daughter of King

Aretas IV of Nabatea, he became enamoured with Herodias, his step-niece and also wife his half-brother Herod II, also known in the gospel account as Philips. So Antipas and Herodias decided to marry each other, but first by divorcing their own spouses. As I stated, this whole family was truly dysfunctional and incestuous.

So John the Baptist, in righteousness, spoke up against Antipas and Herodias, *“It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”* Fearing the Baptizer’s influence with the people, Antipas had him arrested, thrown in prison. Herodias, holding a grudge over John’s proclamation against her second marriage, had wanted to have him killed, but Antipas would not permit it, for he recognized John as a righteous and holy man. The author of Mark added in verse 20, *“when he (Antipas) heard him (John), he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him”*. Evidently, not only did Antipas acknowledge John as a prophet, a man from God, he actually enjoyed listening to John. We don’t really know what else John said to Antipas, other than the initial condemnation of the marriage. But whatever else was said, it was perhaps having an effect. Antipas’ conscience was moved somewhat, he was puzzled and perplexed, he continued to listen to John, yet it was not enough.

What follows in the gospel account is perhaps one of the more disturbing passages in the Bible. Antipas was holding a banquet, celebrating his own birthday with his courtiers, officers and distinguishing guests from Galilee. The daughter of Herodias (so that would make her Antipas’s niece and step-grand niece, now step-daughter) danced to entertain the court. The young girl was so captivating and mesmerizing that Antipas, out of whatever creepy and yucky dark psyche, promised her anything she wanted, up to half of his kingdom. The girl, after consulting with her mother, requested the ‘head of John the Baptist on a platter’. Antipas, although grieved over the request, did not want to disappoint the girl or to look bad in front of his own guests. So the oath was fulfilled, the man of God was beheaded, another prophet killed in the line of faithful duty to the Lord.

There really is very little grace, very little redeeming feature in this story of beheading of John, except its placement in the overall ministry of Jesus, right after the sending out of the twelve disciples, out to do God’s work, in God’s name. That pitiful Antipas would soon loose a war against King Aretas IV of Nabatea, seeking to avenge the disgrace of his daughter. Antipas himself would be sent into exile not long after, by the psychotic Roman emperor Caligula, in yet another forgotten power struggle.

Perhaps we could take a lesson out of Antipas. He did listen to John, his heart was puzzled and perplexed, but it failed to move him to repentance, to the act of turning around. Perhaps we should also ask ourselves, how often do we

listen to prophetic voices of our time, and be entertained by them? How often have those voices moved us to act?

Be it the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who stood almost alone against the Third Reich, even advocated for the assassination of Hitler, and was executed for his conviction. Be it the American pastor and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., who outlined a vision, a dream that his four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. Be it the political activist Noam Chomsky, who explained how consent could be manipulated, manufactured by corporate media conglomerates, right under our noses. Be it the daring journalist Edward Snowden, who exposed how that Big Brother NSA is constantly monitoring all aspects of our modern communications. Or be it that failed presidential candidate Al Gore, who perplexed us with 'an inconvenient truth' that carbon dioxide emission from human activities will soon result in a catastrophic rise in the global temperature, thus forever altering how we will soon live.

Not all these prophetic voices came out of the Christian faith tradition, but they all share a common trait: our failure to heed them in timely manner is resulting in our continuing inability to build a truly just and lasting society today—a peaceful kingdom of heaven on earth. Perhaps, we could take solace in the fact that the work of God does continue, even in the face of rejecting, persecution, and yes even death. God continues to raise up prophets in every generation, speaking not condemnation to the marginalized, the downtrodden, but speaking truth to power, with courage and conviction.

I shall leave with you a passage of the Apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians 4: 7-12: *"But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you."*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.