

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201907201614)

Prophetic Bananas

In nomine...

I. Intro

In the Episcopal Church, our readings for Sundays are arranged in a three year cycle. This is year C, which means, among other things, that our Old Testament or Hebrew Bible readings are primarily from the prophets. That's exciting to me because I feel like the prophets are often some of the most under-appreciated sections of the Bible. The prophets spoke with passion and insight, and there was a reason their words were preserved in our Bibles. They were not preserved for historical interest, though we can learn a lot from them. They were not preserved because they claim to be fortune tellers like Nostradamus. They were preserved because they speak about deep truths that were relevant in their own times and continue to be relevant today. The prophets have a message for us, and that is the message of Jesus.

When Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" they immediately responded, "Elijah, or one of the prophets." The crowds following Jesus understood him to be acting as a prophet. Jesus took his own mission statement directly from the words of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus performed the works of a prophet, enacting signs of God's message and even healing people and raising the dead. He spoke like a prophet, speaking truth into a world of uncertainty and conflict. Jesus even died like a prophet, killed by those in power who knew he was attacking their privilege and authority.

Jesus proclaimed a way of understanding and living in the world which was cleansed of sin and corruption and instead accorded with God's intentions for the world. Jesus issued an invitation to every person: past, present and future, to know themselves as God's beloved children, living in God's world, with God's power at work in them.

This is what the prophets of old were doing, too. So let's look at our first reading, from Amos.

II. Amos

But first I have to talk about bananas.

Last week, my parents dropped off some bananas at my house. When I asked why, I was told my mom only eats them when they're green. I can understand where she's coming from. One day a banana is green. The second it is yellow. On the third day, it has two brown spots. And on the fourth: it's completely brown and turned to mush. It's too late to eat it. The window for eating a banana is exceedingly small, isn't it?

Amos in a vision sees a basket of ripe summer fruit: fruit that is ripe today but will be totally rotten tomorrow. It is a people who have received God's care and concern but have not embraced God's vision of the world, those Kingdom of God ethics. Their time, says God, is up.

Now the people Amos is speaking to, today we would say they go to church every week, besides Christmas and Easter. But their attendance at religious services is not transforming who they are, not giving them a vision of the world as the Kingdom of God. Instead, they're just showing up to signify their respectability and then are eager to get back to the real desire of their hearts: profit. Amos tells us how these food sellers are specifically crafting scoops that are too small, weights that are too heavy, and scales that are inaccurate in order to cheat their customers and to maximize their profits. And their target audience for this deception are the poor and the vulnerable, the very people least able to defend themselves, least able to afford a lawyer to help them seek justice. This is intentional, structural injustice. These people, says God, are like fruit that once had potential, but now has totally turned to mush.

III. Prophets

Have you heard, like I did, that good preaching will “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable?” Here’s the thing: if you find prophets boring or irrelevant to your life, you’re not really hearing them. Comfort and affliction are the two intended responses to an actual prophetic word.

If you read the prophets and respond with joy and shouts of Hallelujah, you are likely being comforted. For those who have been oppressed or hurt, the words of a prophet are God’s promise of vindication, redemption, salvation. It is a promise from God that “All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.”

The second way to receive the word of a prophet is with fear and trembling. Maybe even with anger or revulsion, which are themselves simply secondary expressions of fear. Prophets say things that are hard and indelicate. They are not concerned with sparing feelings but rather seek to shock their hearers into awareness, to wake us up from a privilege-induced moral slumber. So it can be hard for us to hear the prophets. It requires humility, the capacity to self-soothe, and a willingness to change.

The good news is that that fear, that anger, that pain inspired by the prophets are signs that God is at work in your heart. They signify you have indeed heard the prophet’s message and you have been given the freedom to make a choice. Will you live in thrall to your fear, stew in your own juices, rot in your own anger, like over-ripened fruit? Or will you die to self, die to your fear, and let God do God’s work in your heart? Will you allow God to draw you more deeply into God’s Kingdom?

IV. Invitation

We've all been on the wrong side of words of judgement and condemnation. The words of the prophets, the words of Jesus, say fearful things to every single one of us who will simply consent to listen. We know our sin in part, and we are ignorant in part, and we do well to confess it all freely and frequently.

The Good News is that it's not too late. We are like that summer fruit: ripe, and not quite yet gone over. On the cross, Jesus has *already* forgiven us of every evil deed, reconciled us despite every offensive mistake. So when we hear the prophets, how do we make sure we are on the right side of them?

As Deacon John suggested last week, we do this by following Jesus' example of solidarity with the afflicted. Just as Jesus took on flesh, stepped outside God's perspective, and joined us to see the world through fully human eyes, we can learn to see through the eyes of God by looking through the eyes of our neighbors. Through the eyes of the hungry, the homeless, the heart-broken. Through the eyes of those who have been racialized, sexualized, and traumatized. Through the eyes of immigrants and strangers. Through the eyes of those struggling with addiction and with mental illness. Through the eyes of political opponents and our bosses and our employees, and even our in-laws. Through the eyes of children and of parents, of single people and of the elderly. Through the eyes of any person we would be tempted to label "them" or "other" or "different." We do this by building relationships with them, hearing their stories, honoring their experiences, and embracing their lives as equal in value to our own. When we do this, we will bear good fruit: naturally, lovingly, and fiercely enacting the Kingdom of God in our daily words and deeds.

The time to do this is now: like ripe summer fruit. Don't keep putting off God's promises for you, lest you grow mushy and rotten like an over-ripe banana. The Kingdom of Heaven draws near today, and awaits your embrace.

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