

- 1) *You are God's Chosen People; but that doesn't get you any special favors!*
God holds you in steadfast love; but God loves other tribes too.
Remember—God sometimes dispatches food deliveries and medical assistance teams to the very folks you hate and fear.
If that's how a prophet talks when he comes back home, no wonder he's not accepted!
How would you advise Jesus, if you were on his seminarian sermon listening committee?
"Well, Jesus, if *all eyes* are *fixed* on you, *don't* begin by giving them a *poke*."
(As a suggestion for the failed sermon of a first time preacher, this is hardly rocket science.)
Luke tells us that Jesus' listeners, duly insulted, try to throw this prophet off a cliff.
What does Jesus expect—that they'll be shouting *Amen—Preach it, brother?*
If only Jesus had read those beautiful lines in 1st Corinthians 13, he'd know that—in comparison to love—
prophetic insight and eloquence are nothing, nada, zip.
"Love is patient, love is kind . . . love is not arrogant or rude."
Wise words. Too bad Paul hadn't gotten round to writing them yet.
- 2) It's only fair, however, to pause and admit that prophets—as the term is often used—have a hard row to hoe.
Ever tried being "prophetic"? It isn't much fun.
You see serious trouble brewing on the horizon.
You try to warn your kid, spouse, colleague, boss, organization, the potential voters in the next election.
You reason, appeal, cajole, offer alternatives, raise your voice and wave your arms.
No one pays attention. The storm breaks, just as you predict. Everyone get seriously soaked.
And all you can do (dripping wet yourself) is utter a frustrated "I told you so."
Easier to criticize a prophet than to be one, isn't it?
So, let's cut Jesus a little sympathetic slack, shall we?
What is he up to here? And where is he coming from?
- 3) What is Jesus up to?
When we take a close look, we come upon something of a surprise:
This self-proclaimed prophet is not *predicting anything*.
Jesus is *clearly naming what is coming into being in the present*.
(Namely--God reaching out with *special* care to those who are in *special* need.)
And Jesus is giving examples of how this has also happened in ages past.
(Namely--God *giving* care to folks who were widely regarded as *not deserving* care.)
Jesus the prophet is not fortune telling, prognosticating, or assessing leading indicators.
Jesus is announcing what is happening, here and now, and what that means.
He is saying clearly what he sees and what the implications are
(even though the implications are not what his listeners expect or wish to hear).
If this prophet's vision is taken to heart, then--and only then--
the future can be far brighter for everyone than it otherwise will be.
If the prophet's vision is disregarded—
well, at least nobody will be able to say "No one ever told us."
- 4) So, a prophet is not a weirdo with a crystal ball in one hand, and a brickbat in the other,
screaming doom and gloom—*Repent or you are toast!*
A prophet is not a politician who self-righteously "speaks truth to power".
Otherwise the US House and Senate are filled with prophets
simultaneously shouting partisan truths against opposing power blocks.
(From such noisy gongs and clanging cymbals, Good Lord, Deliver Us.)

No, a prophet is a person who *clearly names the way things are* in the passionate hope that those who hear will see things in a *different* light—not in an *opposing* light, but in a *new* light—and then redirect their lives according to that illumination. That’s pretty abstract—what does it actually look like?

- Walter Brueggemann encounter
 - Preaching conference with students from all seminaries—of all theological perspectives
 - Visiting speaker advances a shrill liberal agenda, and slams respectful conservative questioners
 - Liberal bishop names conservative seminaries, saying “get with the program or get out.”
 - Conference degenerates in to polar camps
 - Brueggemann comes as another guest speaker, affirms the insights of both liberal and conservative perspectives, and critiques their shortsightedness
 - The dividing line is redrawn, and the community reconnects with energy
- Thomas Friedman—“Situational Values and Sustainable Values” (New York Times, 1/27/10)
 - “Leaders, companies, or individuals guided by situational values do whatever the situation will allow, no matter the wider interest of their communities . . . saying: “I’ll be gone when the bill comes due.”
 - “People inspired by sustainable values act just the opposite, saying: “I will never be gone. I will always be here. Therefore I must behave in ways that sustain — my employees, my customers, my suppliers, my environment, my country, and my future generations.”
 - “Lately, we’ve been seeing an explosion of situation thinking” He recounts this explosion in government and business, administration and congress, Republicans and Democrats, and then concludes:
 - “We badly need leaders inspired by sustainable values, not situational ones. Without that, we’ll just be digging our hole deeper and making the reckoning, when it comes, that much more ferocious”

This, I think, is what Jesus is doing when he reminds his listeners—to their chagrin:

- that God’s Good News cannot be equated with whatever makes *our* kind feel *lots better*.
- that God’s Good News is a solemn pledge that the favor of God does not play favorites.
- that (to appropriate St. Paul’s words) since all our perspectives are partial, God’s perfect Love is deliberately, relentlessly dispensed with no partiality.

5) When you think about it, this is really scary stuff—“dangerous,” as Susan said last week.

If all a prophet does is storm and scream: “You’ll burn in hell!”

then people can cruise on by with a giggle or a snort.

But if a prophet shows us God really means business about this radical fairness thing—

well, the natural reaction is, in fact, to pitch the prophet off the closest cliff.

So—where is Jesus coming from when he strides into Nazareth announcing God’s earth-shattering Good News?

“I’m glad you asked,” says storyteller Luke, “it all begins with Jesus’ baptism.”

Up from the water Jesus comes, dripping wet. *Cleanse me too, O God*, he prays.

You are my child, my beloved says God’s descending Spirit dove. *I know who you are.*

“And just like you are—no credentials, clout, charisma, or spin—

With you I am well pleased—I made you, I know you, I love you.

The only requirement—and the only hope—for being a prophet,

is to be deeply centered in the fact that you are fully known as God’s beloved child.

You don’t have to win arguments or converts to prove your worth.

You *do* have to listen and to speak with care; but you don't have to be right *every* time—
because the best you can do at *any given* time becomes an altar for God's Holy Fire.
Where is Jesus coming from? From his baptism as God's beloved child.

A baptism, and a bonding, that is yours and mine as well.

6) But that's not the only place Jesus is coming from—

he's just come comes from the wilderness as well as from the river.

Prove you're special! Turn stones to bread! – I need not; I know God loves me.

Extend your influence! Control the world! -- I will not; I love the world as God loves me.

Go for special effects! Do a dramatic suicide dive and trust God to catch you. --

I'll do no such thing. Love doesn't play games like that.

The temptation of Jesus, you see, is not just an initiation rite.

Jesus in the wilderness is going through a test drive of the same road hazards he will hit,
once he cruises into Nazareth—

Come on, Jesus, show your stuff, do for us the very same thing that you did for them.

So *NO*, says Jesus, and *NO*, and *NO*—to the insidious temptations to entitlement.

Love is not about receiving and dispatching cloaks of comfort and invulnerability.

Love is the centered, relentless commitment to fairness and compassion.

7) So that's where Jesus is coming from when he cruises into Nazareth.

Like his great-great-great-prophetic grandfather Jeremiah—

his eyes opened, his lips touched, his whole being known and loved—

Jesus sets out to light up a new way of looking at the world.

A fresh ways of savoring it, new categories for describing it.

And bold pictures for imagining its full implications.

And thus the tide of God's Love Never Failing surges in yet again.

Old ghetto walls are overthrown, new housing walls are built.

Noxious weeds are uprooted; healthy trees are planted.

And when, in a frenzy of destructive hate,

those who are threatened by such radical love try to hurl him off the mountain—

well, deeply centered as he is in the God's all-knowing love,

Jesus just slips through the hurricane and goes calmly and resolutely about his prophetic business

patient and kind . . . not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude

bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things

8) By the way, there's a personal invitation for us to come along in the company of prophets.

Scary stuff! Dangerous business! Interested?

Well, it all begins, not by telling other people What For, or Where to Get Off.

It all begins by paying gentle, careful attention to the curious contours of your life.

What flickering signs and signals seem to invite a fresh look?

Signs and signals that ever so subtly, but ever so surely suggest

that you fully known by God, loved as you are,

and being transformed into something fresh and new.