

Rev. Lynne Ogren  
June 24, 2018

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT  
John the Baptist Luke 1:57-80

This week our women's Bible study looked at the story of the prophet Samuel at the time that Israel had asked God for a king. By insisting on an earthly king, Israel was essentially turning away from God as their king. From Samuel's perspective this meant he had failed as God's prophet. In our study, the women wondered together about who our prophets are today, or if we even have prophets anymore.

On this day we remember and honor the prophet known as John the Baptist. Prophets have a unique role in the Judeo-Christian history, even as they each served God's purposes in their own ways.

Some prophets, like Samuel, were public figures in strong leadership positions. They often began their proclamations to the people with "Thus says the Lord!" Somehow they had a direct line to God's thoughts and could convey God's words as quotations from the Lord.

Other prophets spoke God's word in more subtle, personal ways. Nathan was a prophet who served King David. One day he told a little story to David about a man and his beloved lamb that was stolen by the landowner. The story showed David his own sin involving one of his soldiers, Uriah, and his wife, Bathsheba. The prophet Nathan was God's voice in King David's ear.

John the Baptist is the last of the biblical prophets. John's ministry was grounded in the covenant God made with Abraham and renewed with Moses and the Israelites during the Exodus.

The first half of Zechariah's song declares God's faithfulness to that covenant. Then he commissions his newborn son: "you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins."

And that is what John did. He went before Jesus. He prepared his way by calling the people to repent, to turn again to the God of Abraham by turning toward the One who was coming, the one whose life, death, and resurrection would provide the path to forgiveness, salvation, and peace.

Do you think we have prophets anymore? Do you think we need them?

In our Bible study it was rather easy to look back in history at people who had prophetic messages like Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Teresa. It was suggested that Pope Francis serves as a kind of prophet today, and we even look to our pastors, priests, and bishops in every Christian denomination to speak God's word and interpret it for God's people today.

If the role of a prophet is to turn the people's hearts back to God or to prepare a way for Christ to enter into their lives, that means that the prophet also calls people to turn away from something or someone else.

In Samuel's time, God knew that if the people had a human king they would eventually come to worship that person, or at least that role, rather than looking to God to care for them, lead them, and protect them. And that's exactly what happened. God's people put their trust in their human kings, who always ended up turning toward other gods or thinking they had enough power without God.

Two thousand years later, not much has changed. Each nation has their leader or ruler or designated head of state. How much faith and trust and power do we give to these human beings? How much faith do we put in our ourselves?

Our hope and salvation does not come from any one particular human leader. And though we might say that as individuals we don't have enough power in our lives, the fact is we still rely on our own strength and wisdom more than we rely on God.

True prophets call us to place our hope in the God who "has raised up a mighty savior for us", who has "shown [us] the mercy promised to our ancestors and has remembered his holy covenant...that we...might serve [God] without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." But even those we see as leaders of the faith make mistakes or speak their own opinions from time to time. We must not follow any human leader blindly, even in the church.

When the angel Gabriel came to Zechariah in the temple, he told Zechariah to name his son John, which means "Beloved of God." In Holy Baptism we too are named as God's beloved children. In the rites of baptism and Affirmation of Baptism we claim the calling "to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed." John may have been the last of the biblical prophets, but we are also called to speak a prophetic word in our time and place.

Each week we gather for worship to listen to God through the voices of human readers and preachers of God's word. We are sent from this time to use what we have heard and learned in ways that "give light to those who sit in darkness...to guide our feet into the way of peace."

As we leave here to love and serve the Lord, we must listen carefully to the voices of our day. Compare them to the word that proclaims "knowledge and salvation" and "the tender mercy of our God", a mercy we know through Jesus Christ. Then we are compelled to speak in ways that give light to those who sit in darkness.

Central American violence, immigrants detained at our borders, the turmoil of children separated from parents, another black teenager killed by a police officer all topped the headlines just this week. How will we speak light into those places of darkness?

A cancer diagnosis, the death of a mother, a parent estranged from their adult child, chronic pain, a marriage on the rocks—how will we speak light into those places of darkness?

We are not called to judge or accuse or condemn. These messages do not guide us or others into the way of peace. As a congregation, as families, and individuals we are all called to speak the prophetic word in the world, whether we have a public voice like John the Baptist or we bear the word of God more privately to our friends and neighbors, or as we write to our elected officials.

We are each named “Beloved of God” in our baptisms. We are commissioned to be messengers of God’s faithfulness and mercy and to guide this world into the way of peace.

Let us pray.

Eternal God, amid all the turmoil and changes of the world your love is steadfast and your strength never fails. In this time when divisions are deep and fear seems to rule the day, be to us a sure guardian and rock of defense. Guide the leaders of our nation and all nations with your wisdom, comfort those in distress, and grant us courage and hope to face the future and speak your words of promise; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

**Amen**