

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *Prophets*
SERIES: *Old Testament*
SCRIPTURES: *Prophets*
SPEAKER: *Shaun Kipe*
DATE: *3 - 8 - 2020*

**Credit to Philip Yancey; The Bible Project!; John Ortberg*

Well good morning, it so great to worship with you.

Today we are in the final week of our sermon series called, “**The Old Testament...Why Bother?**” (Series Graphic)

The Old Testament is confusing and offensive to so many people. And so we’ve been taking a few weeks to try and understand the big picture ideas/themes of the Old Testament, which can help us to make sense of the Old Testament.

We’ve talked about the **Jewish Law**, this is what makes up the first 5 books of the Bible. We’ve looked at the book of **Job** and the **Psalms**, which fall right in the middle of the OT. And this morning, as we close out our Old Testament series, we want to talk about the big section of books at the end of the Old Testament...**the prophets.**

I. Understanding the prophets.

In terms of page length and number of words, the books of the prophets take up about as much of the Bible as the entire New Testament.

There are 17 books of the prophets (or 15 depending on who you ask and how you group the books).

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, 3 major prophets. It's a complicated system but they're called Major Prophets because their books are long. And then there are 14 (or 12) minor prophetic books **Lamentations, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah, Malachi**. Again, it's complicated, but they are known as the minor prophets, because their books are shorter.

Now, the reason that many people avoid the prophetic books is because they are...

A. Weird

“Prophets are weird, confusing and they all sound alike!”

They had radical experiences of God's divine presence. They spoke in dreams and visions and poetry. They tend to be strange and eccentric. And even their lives became “illustrations” of God's relationship to the people of Israel. Some fascinating, bizarre stories.

Ezekiel for example, read the first four chapters of Ezekiel. God commands him to lay on his side, in the dirt, for 440 days! And to build a clay model of Jerusalem being attacked by Babylon. **(PIC of Ezekiel)**

Isaiah walked around naked for three years as symbol of the humiliation of the nation of Israel during exile.

Isaiah 20 - the LORD spoke through Isaiah son of Amoz. He said to him, “Take off the sackcloth from your body and the sandals from your feet.” And he did so, going around stripped and barefoot.

³ Then the LORD said, “Just as my servant Isaiah has gone stripped and barefoot for three years, as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush,^[a] ⁴ so the king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles, young and old, with buttocks bared—to Egypt’s shame.

You never heard those passages in church before, did you?

One author has described reading the prophets, like walking through an art Gallery, especially for those of us that are not art connoisseurs or experts...you’re left wondering, **“What I am supposed to be getting here?”**

Did you see this piece of art, that went viral a couple of months ago? **(PIC OF BANANA DUCT taped to wall)**

A banana that was duct-taped to a wall at a recent Art Gallery showing. You ready for this it sold for \$120,000.

The fruit and tape in question was the work of Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan, and it literally is just a banana duct-taped to a wall, titled “The Comedian.” [CBS News](#) reports that there are actually three “editions” of the work of art, two of which have been sold. The third banana is expected to go for an even higher \$150,000.

And I hear this kind of thing and I’m left wondering *“what am I supposed to be getting here?”* And so, just so you all are aware...this morning I am going to be auctioning off...PULL OUT BANANA & DUCT TAPE!

But this is often true as we read through the stories of the prophets. They can seem confusing, strange, eccentric.

Even the names of the prophetic books, which are difficult for many people to pronounce comfortably...Habakkuk, Haggai, Malachi...is enough to make people stay away.

All that to say, as you approach these books, it's good to remember...

“The prophetic books were written for people who were well-versed and studied, immersed in Jewish Law and History”. They require work. So be patient, with some of the strange imagery, names...that you encounter.

I also think it's good to acknowledge...

B. A Common Error

when we read the prophets. If you ask most people in our world today...

What comes to your mind when you hear the word “prophecy” or prophets?

What do you think most people would say?

Fortune-telling...predicting the future.

And so you have people, looking for hidden codes or symbols, with secret messages.

Sometimes people get into counting numbers, months, days, trying to link the imagery and language to certain figures in modern history etc. And we tend to do this, not just with the Old Testament prophetic books, but with all Biblical prophecy...the book of Revelation is sometimes the epitome of this.

And there are several problems with viewing biblical prophecy in this manner. One of the most obvious, is that many of the secret codes and links that well-meaning people make to modern history, have turned out to be wrong.

“Christians had bet on the wrong horses in the 1940’s when Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini seemed to vie for the role of AntiChrist; and in the 1840’s when believers gathered on mountaintops to await Christ’s return...Such luminaries as Jonathan Edwards, Martin Luther, and Isaac Newton made solemn declarations about the fulfillment of prophecy that now appear foolish.

I remember in the 1980’s hearing Hal Lindsey relate a spy scandal to biblical prophecy, thus moving the world much closer to the end times...his book “The Late Great Planet Earth” was the best-selling book of the 1970’s, bar none...a friend of mine cynically commented that the reason James Dobson grew so popular is that Hal Lindsey proved wrong about the end of the world: Christians suddenly realized they had enough time left to raise families.

Jewish Scribes had centuries to pour over the prophecies of Jesus birth and life, passages that seem crystal-clear to believers today, and not one of them came up with accurate predictions of the Messiah’s First Coming. Why should we expect to do any better with the Second Coming?” (Yancey 172)

And so, just say this as a word of caution...it is not helpful to us the prophetic books in the Bible, in this manner.

Second, and most importantly, is because in the Bible, the prophets are not primarily fortune-tellers trying to predict the future.

Though they do make some future predictions, that is only a small portion of prophecy in the Bible and it is not the primary goal.

“Future prediction is something some prophets do some of the time.” (Bible Project)

What is the role of the prophets?

In Scripture, Prophets' primary role is acting as

C. The Mouthpiece of God.

They speak to the people on behalf of God.

Turn with me for a minute to a section of Moses' story. Though Moses does not have a prophetic book, he is the archetypal prophet. And he is introduced in scripture to give us the paradigm for understanding Biblical prophecy.

God show up to Moses and says, "Go to the Pharaoh of Egypt and speak to him on my behalf." And if you recall Moses begins getting into all of these reasons why he isn't capable of doing that. I'm not a good speaker. And so on and so God says...

"What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well...¹⁵ You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; ¹⁶ He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him.

Aaron will be Moses' prophet or mouth piece. That's the primary of a prophet in your Bible. Speak to the people on behalf of God.

In our house, Keagan is kind of like the prophet to his older brother and sister. He's always got his eye out for how they are breaking the Kipe Household rules and he is only too happy to set in and make sure they know "Daddy says, you can't watch TV right now."

And so when you are reading through the prophets you'll notice they regularly say things like this:

Jonah 1 - The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:

Jeremiah 2 - The word of the LORD came to me: ² “Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: “This is what the LORD says:

Isaiah 20 - the LORD spoke through Isaiah son of Amoz.

When I was at Messiah, our Old Testament professor, Terry Brensinger, said it's helpful think about it this way...

In the Bible, the role of the **Priest** is someone who brings people into God's presence. A priest speaks to God on behalf of the people.

The role of a **Prophet** is one who hears from God and brings God's message to His people. Prophets speak to the people on behalf God.

Do you see the difference?

Sometimes the message the prophets bring, is about the future, but not their primary function.

So, if the message from the prophets is NOT mostly about predicting the future, what is the message that the prophets are bringing to God's people?

There are a few key themes throughout the prophetic books that can help you to make sense of what you're reading. I just want to talk about three of them.

II. The Message of the prophets.

First, a large chunk of the prophetic books are related to...

A. Warnings about unfaithfulness.

Remember, Israel, was in a covenant relationship with God.

Exodus 19 - ⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession...

But...

Deuteronomy – 8:19 - ¹⁹ If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them (if you are unfaithful to me), I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed.

The terms of that covenant were laid out in the Jewish law.

In fact, have you ever seen a picture of the 10 commandments (**PIC OF 10 Commandments**)?

Whenever you see a picture of the 10 commandments, that's a representation of God's agreement with Israel. Anyone know how many tablets there were? Two stone tablets. Why are there two stone tablets?

Many people think it's because the 10 commandments wouldn't fit on one tablet. So when you see pictures of this, it's always 5 on one tablet and 5 on the other tablet.

But this is likely not the case. When a covenant was made in the ancient world, they always made two copies of the covenant. One for each party in the covenant so that both parties might remember to uphold their end of the bargain.

So, almost certainly, there were two stone tablets with all 10 commandments written on each. One copy was for Israel, the other copy was for God.

And do you know what the very first term of the covenant was? What is the first commandment?

You shall have no other God's.

The very first term was primary and ultimate allegiance to God. What did Jesus say is the greatest commandment... first, "Love God."

This is where the prophets stepped in. Is Israel holding up their end of the covenant? Here's what you find in the books of the prophets...

Ezekiel 2 - ³ He said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me;

Jeremiah 9:2 - for they are all adulterers, a crowd of unfaithful people.

1 Chronicles 5:25 - ²⁵ But they were unfaithful to the God of their ancestors and prostituted themselves to the gods of the peoples of the land, whom God had destroyed before them...

In story, after story, Israel's Kings and priests and the nation...failed to remain faithful to God and instead turned to worshipping the false gods and idols of the nations around them. Giving their allegiance and loyalty to other gods.

It was kind of fascinating the other week. I don't follow professional Hockey that closely, but do you recognize this guy? **(PIC OF Dave AYRES)**

If I understand professional hockey teams, you only keep two goalies on your team. One who is the starter and one who is the backup. And that's it. If by chance, both goalies happen to get injured in quick succession, you could be a team without a

goalie. And so they have this rule in hockey that the home team is to have a third back-up goalie prepared to fill in for either team. This third “back-up goalie” is not a professional. Because of this kind of situation is so rare.

This happened to the **Carolina Hurricanes** hockey team two weeks ago...and they were headed to **Toronto** for their next game. During the game...both of their goalies got injured.

It turns out the third back-up goalie, is a Toronto native, Dave Ayres who works at the Toronto Hockey Arena as a Zamboni driver. You know the machines they bring out to clean the ice. He is a former hockey player, but not good enough to be on Toronto’s team. So he drives the Zamboni at the ice rink in Toronto.

So, Carolina loses both goalies, they have to call on a guy who works for the other team to play for them. It’s like for half the game he’s sitting their cheering for his hometown Toronto Team and then all of a sudden, he’s gotta throw on the Jersey of the opposing team and go out and try to beat his home team!

And it kind me think when I was reading the article: Where is this guy’s primary allegiance? Would you want him in your goal? Would he actually join the out of town team and seriously play for them?

The story got so much publicity because not only did Dave Ayres play for the opposing Carolina team against his hometown Toronto team. He played so well, Carolina ended winning the game. He helped the out-of-towners, defeat his home team.

So much for loyalty and faithfulness.

What Toronto needed in that stadium was a prophet! Dave, you can't be unfaithful to your home-town team man! You can save some of the goals, but you gotta some of them go in!

God says, *“for me to be your God and you to be my people...I demand your primary allegiance and loyalty. No other god's before me.”*

Israel failed, time and time again, they turned their back on God to worship and serve the god's of the nations around them, to play for the opposing team.

I know sometimes people will look at the message and say, that's for ancient people. That doesn't really apply in modern North America. I began to think about the subtlety of our allegiances and loyalties to the god's in our world.

Those things in our lives that demand our resources and our affection ahead of or in place of God.

If you've been wondering about your primary loyalty...here are a few things to consider:

1. Have you looked at your finances recently? **Where do most of your resources go?**
2. Have you looked at your schedule? **Where does most of your time go?**
3. If someone else were looking at your finances and your time and your priorities and your life...would they know that “LOVING GOD” is at the top?

One of the primary themes throughout the prophets is this warning about unfaithfulness to God. You have given your allegiance, your heart, your top priority to something or someone other than God. It's a warning for you and me as well.

Second. Another primary theme throughout the prophets is a

B. A warning about neglecting the poor, the widow and the foreigner.

Remember according to Jewish Law (the agreement), Israel was supposed to be a unique community, representing God to the world. A community of justice and generosity. A community that would treat women differently, the poor differently, foreigners differently, their enemies differently.

Jesus said, the second greatest commandment is what, “Love others...”

Listen to what the prophets were saying...

Ezekiel 22 - ²⁹ The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the foreigner, denying them justice.

Amos 2 - ⁶ This is what the LORD says: They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. ⁷ They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.

In fact there's a well-known passage of Scripture that is often misrepresented from the Book of Ezekiel. Have you heard of the phrase...the sin of Sodom? What is the sin of Sodom? Turn to...

Ezekiel 16:49 - ⁴⁹ “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.

Neglecting the poor and the needy is the sin of Sodom!

What the prophets remind us, is that indifference and silence in the face of injustice is not ok. I will just tell you as wealthy, middle-class, North Americans, how easy it is to neglect the poor and powerless in our world. How easy to justify our positions of power?

“The situation of a person immersed in the prophets’ words is one of being exposed to a ceaseless shattering of indifference, and one needs a skull of stone to remain callous to such blows.” (Abraham Heschel...Yancey 171)

You can see why, the prophets were often not very popular people. They said things people didn’t want to hear. They called the people to account.

And I began to wonder, while it’s true that the stories of the Old Testament prophets are often strange, sometimes confusing to our modern ears...I wonder, I wonder if part of the reason we don’t like to read the prophets today is because we also don’t like the message they have for us. Where is your primary allegiance? Are you taking care of the poor, the widow, the foreigner?

You see, in the midst of the often strange, confusing, eccentric stories and rhetoric of the prophetic books we actually find a very simple message from God to His people. **“All the Law and the prophets hang on these two commands: Love God and love others.” (JESUS)**

So how are you doing?

This brings us to a third primary theme, throughout the prophets.

C. The Thread of Grace

Remember we said one of the primary characteristics of the Old Testament is a thread of grace from beginning to end.

That in the midst of Israel's failure to keep the agreement...loving God and loving others...God was going to rescue His people anyway.

You have heard of the phrase **“cutting a deal.”**

It actually comes from the ancient world where people were making covenant agreements. And literally they would make a covenant and then the two parties, would take an animal (goat or heifer) cut it in half and then the two parties would walk between the two halves of the animal as a way to say, *“We are making a deal, and if either of us breaks our end of the agreement, may we become like this animal.”*

It's kind of like when we were young and would make a promise with someone and say, “cross my heart, hope to die, stick a thousand needles in my eye.”

And so in Hebrew the phrase, make a deal, literally means to cut a deal.

There's a really fascinating story in **Genesis 15** where God makes his covenant, cuts a deal with Abraham. *“I will be your God and you will be my people.”* And in an eerie scene, Abraham cuts up these animals and sets the pieces on the ground. And now he and God are supposed to walk through the pieces. But in the story, Abraham falls into a deep trance or sleep. And here's what happens...

Genesis 15:17 - “When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared (representing God) and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram.

STOP! Did you notice what just happened? Abraham never walked through the pieces, only God did. God, makes the covenant walk on his own. God is saying that no matter what happens, no matter who fails, even if it is humanity and not God who breaks the covenant, only God will bear the curse of the broken covenant Himself.

And so, in the midst of Israel's failure, you find in the words of the prophets this incredible message of Grace.

The prophet Isaiah said it like this in a popular passage of Scripture from [Isaiah 53](#) -
⁴ Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

God turns the tragic story of failure, unfaithfulness, disobedience and exile into a story of unfathomable grace!

“For God so loved the world, he sent his son...”

That's the message of the prophets.

The Old Testament...why bother? Well, truth is, when understood rightly, we believe the Old Testament is the beginning of the story of God's incredible love and grace. His desire to be in right relationship with you and me.

Pray.