

Pentecost, Proper 9, July 8 2018 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Ezekiel 2:1-5, Psalm 123, 2 Corinthians 12:2-10, Mark 6:1-13

There's a meme that runs through our national psyche about carnival fortune-tellers. Women or men, they wear a mysterious turban, often with a gem front and center on it, and in dark or dimly lit surroundings they gaze into a crystal ball, and predict the future for any willing supplicant. In England, that meme always seems to begin with "I see a tall, dark stranger..."! There are off-shoots – in this country I think of Chinese restaurant fortune cookies, with their equally vague predictions. Welcome to "Prophesy 101"! It's a magical understanding, a mysterious gift for claiming foreknowledge not accessible to ordinary people. For most folk, this understanding has become synonymous with the meaning of prophesy.

Our culture has then retrojected that understanding onto all the texts that are written by those biblical figures named as "prophets." That's a twisted understanding of what that word – "prophet" – means. A biblical prophet is a person who speaks to the people in the name of God. The prophet's words are always first about the present, and how the peoples' actions in that present will or won't impact the future. And those words always have an ethical, a moral component; they highlight consequences of present actions. Prophets speak against "business as usual," against the *status quo*, which means that those who like "business as usual," and who are benefitting from the *status quo*, resist and reject them. John the Baptist is a great example of biblical figure who spoke against "business as usual."

How does someone become a prophet? The Old Testament reading and the gospel both have the same answer – you get commissioned by God. Ezekiel reports God saying "I am sending you," with the subsequent direction that Ezekiel is to go on God's behalf and proclaim God's words to the Holy People. In the gospel, Jesus commissions the disciples, and sends them out to act and speak on God's behalf.

All the readings speak of prophesy in one way or another. Ezekiel is charged by God with telling the Holy People that their "business as usual" – characterized by impudence, stubbornness, and rebellion – needs to end. ***Ezekiel's called to challenge their arrogance.*** And notice that success isn't defined by the people hearing and repenting but about Ezekiel following through with the work God has given him to do. What we might call "failure" isn't failure in God's eyes, but faithfulness.

The author of Psalm 123 was probably writing toward the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. – at the tail end of the period of the great 8<sup>th</sup> Century prophets, like Amos, and Micah, and the psalm's words echo the focus of those prophets – against "indolent rich" and "the proud," against unreasonable and excessive wealth accumulation in the hands of the elites of Israel, which was forcing the majority of Israelites into abject poverty.

Paul the prophet returns to Ezekiel's theme – raising up humility over pride, arrogance, and self-centeredness.

Jesus the prophet finds that his words about God's compassion and love, and his deeds of

healing, are rejected by those who've known him longest, and his response is to commission his disciples to go out and offer challenge to that narrow and thoughtless perspective through their own words and deeds of love and compassion and healing.

Notice how all today's readings are offering us a vision of prophesy that has the same core identity, but that they each have different 'targets:'

- impudence, stubbornness, and rebellion
- exploitative elitism
- pride and arrogance, and
- the absence of self-reflection and self-awareness