
A Job No One Wants

Luke 13:31-35

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel

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It's a job no one really wants. The benefits aren't really good. In fact, there are no benefits associated with this job. No pensions. No five or six figure salary, no healthcare, no vacation, no sick leave, no medical leave, no parental leave but it's a job that can leave you broke and there's no college admissions scheme to make it any better. No employee perks or discounts for local restaurants like NanaSteak or off-Broadway shows at the DPAC. No employee tuition benefits. Nothing. Just long hours. No overtime pay. No pay in fact. It's possibly the worst job you could ever have. I thought working at Burger King as my very first job as a teenager was the worst job one could have but this job is definitely worse.

You do your job faithfully but it often causes you to cry. You weep. You shed tornado tears. And for what? No one likes you anyway. No one likes what you do and what you say. There are no cheers but lots of jeers. Not even your own family understands. Your hometown treats you like hell, just for doing your job. Your fluffy little lap dog doesn't even want to sit on your lap anymore. This has got to be the worst job ever. Do you know what job I'm talking about? To be a prophet; that's the job no one wants. Some may be eager for it but they have no idea what they are asking for, because if you really want it, you don't know what a prophet is or what happens to prophets.

A prophet in the Old Testament is one who is called or one who is called forth to hear and disseminate God's instructions. Through them, God addresses God's people. Prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah had jobs to "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer 1:10). Isaiah once said, "The Lord will afflict with scabs the heads of the daughters of Zion." Sounds like a very uplifting position. Prophets were not singing saints or moralizing poets but were, as Jewish rabbi and theologian, Abraham Heschel, says, "assaulter[s] of the mind who spoke truth to power." They were set against the power brokers in their societies and who would want to do that, day in and day out? Prophets reject the status quo and speak words of resistance (Walter Brueggemann). Heschel tells us, "Their words are onslaughts, scuttling illusions of false security, challenging evasions, calling faith to account, questioning prudence and impartiality." What a job—to "carry the divine response into a material reality" (K. Gilbert)! It is a beautiful, torturous job. A burdensome joy that no one really wants—to be sent to say 'No' to society and 'Yes' to God's will in the face of social denial and opposition; to subvert and critique the religious, political, and social establishments and announce a radical new future; to pronounce a word of judgement and salvation. "The prophet's word is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophets feel the blast from heaven" (Heschel). Who would want this job? 'Prophet' does not make the list of dreams you have for your children.

So-called modern-day prophets and prophetesses usually present themselves as seers, fortune tellers of the future. But more than foretellers, biblical prophets are truth-tellers. Beware of self-proclaimed prophets in our time for they may only be out to make profits. To be clear, no high school, no church, not even Duke Chapel would hire a prophet. This would make fundraising pretty hard. A prophet may not be profitable financially, but he or she would profit one's soul. But still, no one wants this job and if you do, you don't understand it.

I say this because applying to be a prophet is signing your own death sentence. Suffering and death were traditional marks of a true prophet in Judaism so it's no wonder that Herod wants to kill Jesus, the prophet. Jesus is a prophet, priest, and king and already revealed earlier in Luke how a prophet isn't even accepted in his own hometown. Jesus doesn't help himself either when he basically gives Herod the proverbial middle finger with these words: "Go and tell that fox for me, '... I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.'" Prophets don't make friends, easily.

Even the so-called 'city of peace,' Jerusalem, is an enemy of prophets. Jesus says, "I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem." Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" The irony is that the 'city of peace' kills, making the place of

peace deadly poison for prophets. A certain kind of peace can be deadly, especially for prophets, even in the holy city of Jerusalem. As we've seen throughout history, religious holiness can fuel horror. This isn't what we expect but Jerusalem had already been the context where prophets had been killed (Jeremiah 26:20-23; cf. Matthew 23:29-30; Acts 7:52) and where early Christian witnesses, including Stephen and James, would be martyred (Acts 7:59; 12:2). "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets." Maintaining a semblance of peace can be poisonous for prophets. Who would want this job?

President of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, Dr. Marvin McMickle wrote a book titled, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?* He speaks about our contemporary time and how prophets are missing in action. Where have they gone? Perhaps, they've gone missing because they've all been killed! In Jerusalem, in U.S. cities, in prisons, on the border, at our universities. Maybe they're missing because of all of the killings. Nowhere is safe when you're a prophet, not even your own home. Jerusalem is the place where God goes to die and religious and political hands are bloodied with a prophet's death.

Do you see why being a prophet is a job no one wants? They have bullseyes right between their eyes or on their backs or on their lips because they speak truth to power. They tell hard truths that we don't want to hear. They challenge us, irritate us, and refuse to make us comfortable. And we may not kill them with knives or guns, but we kill them with our words and in our hearts because we know that what they say is so true. Therefore, we aim to give them pain. We want prophets to suffer and eventually die because we can't handle the truth and we want it buried as far beneath the ground as possible. The world, the church, doesn't want the truth because it would mean being changed and transformed into something else. So, we kill prophets in holy places of all places. Deep down we know what they're saying is right, but as Eric Barreto notes, we reject them "because to agree with them is to condemn ourselves." Where have all the prophets gone, Duke Chapel? They're dead!

We've killed them for so long. And in the biblical setting for today, by killing the prophet, God is killed. And this makes sense because often we can't handle what God requires of us because if we face God, we would have to face our true selves and we don't want to do that, so we become like Herod. Happy to kill God so someone else can run the world and control how it works. Who would want to be a prophet? Are there any takers here this morning?

No one wants to be a prophet and if they do, they don't understand what it means. As one theologian has said, it is a "distinction and an affliction" (Heschel). It is a gift and a curse. It is a blessing and a burden. Sweet yet torturous. Prophets like Jeremiah experience grief, "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick," he says (Jer 8) and prophets are lonely—"I sat alone because Thy hand was upon me"(15:7). And Jesus once told his disciples when they fell asleep on him, "Can't you just stay awake with me for one hour?!" Prophets are often by themselves in their jobs, not able to please anyone any of the time. This is a job no one wants. And maybe we shouldn't want it anyway as prophets have to live in and with lament, day in and day out. They are poets of lament.

And this is exactly what Jesus expresses when he says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Jesus laments what Jerusalem does to prophets and what it will do to him. Later on, Jesus weeps over the city as he approaches it (19:41). But as a prophet, he reveals a message of doom and gloom but also a message of hope.

He laments how Jerusalem treats prophets yet he is a prophet of love and compassion when he says, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under wings, and you were not willing!" He laments and he loves in a feminine way, like a hen gathering her brood under wings. He confronts resistance and hate with unflinching love. This is the hope— that regardless of the rejection Jesus endures, he continues to offer his love. He critiques but there's still compassion. Real prophets lament out of love. Jesus laments because he loves. Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff was so right: "Every lament is a love song." If there is no lament, maybe there's no love. Jesus loves so much that he laments when a situation or a people or a city doesn't align with God's purposes. His lament is a love act. He's heading to be killed but he continues to care and share compassion even for his enemies.

It doesn't matter what Herod throws his way or what the city of Jerusalem has in store, he says, "I must be on my way." This prophet, this God, is so committed to his calling no matter what he will face, which means he's so committed to us and that commitment is sealed on a cross, signed in his blood. His lament is transformed into love in the shape of a cross, the means of death Jerusalem will have in mind for him. The cross of Jesus is not only a lament but a dying, undying love, a love for us, even if we aren't prophets. And we don't need to be one anyway, and if we do want it, we probably don't understand it. And we don't have to want it in order to somehow prove the depth of our Christian faith because Jesus wants it because he wants us like a mother hen. Like a mother, a father, a prophet, he's willing to die for his children and he goes "on his way" to the city where it'll happen. He'll be killed for love, his love for the world, including us.

This means that we won't have to be killed like all of the prophets because Jesus' love will kill death ultimately, and we can live through lament with love as we travel the path with Jesus. Jesus, the prophet-God, will overcome annihilation through a resurrection. Being a prophet is a job no one really wants but Jesus takes this on because he wants us forever. We don't have to take the job of a prophet because Jesus is the only real prophet who not only dies but eventually will rise. This is the hope of Lent—the desert will turn into a river, sorrow into joy, and lament into love. Follow Jesus, not on Twitter, but wherever he goes, even if it's to Jerusalem.