

“Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” That is a saying that resonates from my childhood – I can’t be sure but I think my mother quoted it when she was feeling under-appreciated. But I doubt that she actually saw herself as a prophet.

We tend to think of prophets as those who utter prophecy, and prophecy as saying what will happen in the future. But if we look at the call of Ezekiel in that first reading we see something a little different. God tells him, ‘I am sending you to the people of Israel, and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord God.”’

“Thus says the Lord God.” That is the role of the prophet. It was especially the role of the prophet once the Hebrew people had a king. The king and his advisors were often swayed by political and military concerns not to mention their own egos, desire for power and enjoyment of luxury. It was easy for them to forget to honor God except perhaps in outward show. So the prophet’s job was to remind them, “Thus says the Lord” – to point them back towards the God of Israel.

For example, when David had Uriah sent to the frontlines of battle intending that he would be killed, in order that David could have his lovely wife, Bathsheba, it was up to the prophet Nathan to point out his sin in order to restore David to right relationship with God. When the issue was a political or military decision the role of the prophet was often even less welcome. Sometimes the prophetic word was taken by the king and at other times rejected. For example, Jeremiah prophesied that the kingdom would fall to Babylon and he was persecuted and imprisoned to shut him up because they said he was demoralizing the troops. Had he been taken seriously a new treaty might have been made with Babylon and a great deal of suffering avoided.

We are in a similar situation today as climate change continues to speed up. I don’t need to tell you about record setting temperatures and fires in Canada and Cyprus. The prophets have been warning us about this for

the last fifty years but even today we do not have the political will to make the big changes that are necessary. And it is easier to carry on as we are rather than to make the personal sacrifices.

But the role of the prophet is not just to talk about gloom and despair and the need for repentance but to point us to God. Not only “Thus says the Lord” but “Here is the Lord”. That was the kind of prophet that Jesus was, he showed a new way to be with God. And those who responded to that new way experienced a radical healing which not only healed them spiritually but on every level.

But not so much in Nazareth.

In Nazareth, Jesus was just the boy next door, the carpenter’s son. In Nazareth it was almost impossible for the people to see God’s presence manifest in Jesus. We see Jesus as the way, the truth and the life – in other words the very embodiment of “Here is the Lord!”. That was how his disciples came to see him and Jesus himself said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,” (Jn. 14:9). But not the people of Nazareth and as a result he was unable to fully engage his healing ministry among them.

Now here is an important sidebar. We read that Jesus “could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.” This does not mean that if you are sick you are unbelieving. Yes, there is a mind/body/spirit connection. Yes, the food we eat and the way we live and the thoughts we think do have an effect on our bodies. But illness is part of the human condition. We can never blame ourselves for being ill or for being old. We don’t think to blame a cat who gets cancer. Yet we are harsh on ourselves and on others. Healthy people can have a subtle superiority over those who are struggling with the mortality of their bodies. Let us be aware of the subtle inaccurate messages we give ourselves. Illness does not equal a failure to be spiritual enough.

Paul addresses this in the second reading. He had had a profound spiritual experience and as we know, he identified as an apostle – one sent by God to preach the gospel. But despite that, he has an affliction. As he says, “a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.” People have speculated for millennia about the nature of this thorn. In recent years, queer theologians have suggested that Paul was gay. Others have suggested that it was his eyesight that was the problem. The reality is that we just don’t know.

But what is important is that Paul found that this “thorn” was a prophet calling him to God. He says, ‘Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.’

Paul found that though he had considered this affliction to be a messenger of Satan, it was the vehicle for God’s grace. It was a prophet saying “Here is the Lord”. When we are healthy and wealthy and everything is going the way we want it to, we feel that somehow we deserve it, that we are at the top of our game. Or when like Paul we have a great spiritual experience and see visions or hear the voice of the Spirit we may feel that we are specially blessed.

But that is the little ego.

Our little egos are like the kings of Israel who enjoyed the power and the luxury of being king and forgot about God. The thorn or the wounding that we all have in different ways is the prophet who calls us back to God. The God who actually seems to thrive when we are weak, saying, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

The people of Nazareth were so caught up in their perception of Jesus as the carpenter’s son that they could not see nor hear him as a prophet

saying “thus says the Lord” or “here is the Lord.” There are many prophets in our lives. Some of them are people; some of them are oak trees, sunsets, or other parts of Creation; some of them are physical ailments; some of them are mental or emotional challenges.

When we are caught up in our kingly egos it’s easy to miss the prophets who remind us of God. It’s easy to think that God is somewhere else and that we are in charge here. It takes humility to know God’s presence in all things and at all times. We want God to come to us in a big way. But God comes to us in very ordinary ways when we acknowledge our weakness and our need for God.

Let us open the eyes and ears of our hearts to the prophets and let us heed their reminder “Here is the Lord”.