

No Respect for Prophets

By Harriet Koscho

My God is the great and glorious God who sets me free. Free from slavery. Free from fear. Free of preconceptions about who any person is or isn't - because everyone is loved so deeply by God. But in the real world, there are terrible things going on. One question that comes up a lot is - why doesn't God intervene? Why do bad things happen to good people, or even whole groups of people?

My answer to that is this: God takes the long view, and God can predict the aftereffects in people's lives 10, 20, 80, 100 years later. God wants a change, but He loves everybody whether they change or not. He's just watching it all and experiencing it right here with us. And the way He intervenes is by asking real people to do real things that will change the course of history. However, if people don't listen to God's voice, things won't change. Haters will continue to hate, Cheaters will continue to cheat, and injustice will continue to happen. So here's how Ezekiel supports that view: In this passage, Ezekiel recounts how God called him and told him he needed to become a prophet.

Ezekiel 2:1-5

The Lord said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord God." Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

First of all, I like how Ezekiel describes this feeling he has: he feels very weak, but somehow he finds himself standing up and paying attention. Maybe nothing is going to change, but God will be pleased that he said it out loud. God wants Ezekiel to be a prophet. A prophet has to go stand up to the mighty institutions and tell them what they are doing is immoral. Somebody has to say it. Somebody has to say it loudly and often. A most remarkable thing, God says "whether they hear or refuse to hear, they shall know that there has been a prophet among them." Ezekiel thinks that God wants us to speak the truth, but God says that's not going to change anything unless the people listen.

Now let's talk about Jesus. Jesus was the son of God, the Messiah - and part of his job description indeed included being a prophet. He was the best of the best. Two thousand years later we are motivated and strengthened by many of the things Jesus said.

From Mark:

A prophet is not without honor, except in their hometown. And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few people and healed them...

Jesus is in his home town, with his own family, and in the synagogue where he grew up. Now you may be thinking that they are in Bethlehem, but they aren't. Bethlehem is a pretty big town compared to Jesus' hometown. If you recall, Jesus' family had to leave because Herod was killing all the oldest born

babies, so Joseph and Mary took the baby to Egypt and tried to make ends meet over there for a while. When they came back to the Holy Land, they settled in a town called Nazareth. Then later, after Jesus grew up, he traveled to a much smaller town called Capernaum, which is close to the sea of Galilee. It was one of Jesus' favorite places, and there are lots of stories about the miracles he did in that place. However, in our story today, Jesus shows up in Nazareth, and a lot of people are there who remember Jesus when he was just a kid. When they see him, they are astonished - he doesn't look any different to them. How did He do all of those amazing things that people have been talking about? They said he made a storm stop simply by saying, "Peace, be still!" They say he can heal sick people. and walk on water. But that can't be true, because he's over there laughing and joking with his brothers James, Joses, Judah, and Simon. His sisters are all so glad to see him too. Sisters? Who even knew that Jesus had baby sisters. Did he help his Mama raise the other kids? Did he have to babysit, wash dishes, hang up wet clothes? Is Joseph still upset that Jesus quit the family business, because he was a pretty decent carpenter.... Anyway, what happens next is very surprising to us: Jesus does not do any miracles. It's like Superman in the presence of Kryptonite. He can't do anything there. They are all skeptical and giving him some serious side eye. Jesus says: "A prophet is not without honor except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." - Nobody is honoring Jesus at all - and they won't listen to anything he has to say - they are so busy thinking they know who Jesus is, because he grew up with them.

Has something like this ever happened to you? Have you ever had a friend who only remembers the most embarrassing moments, the negative stuff, with conversations filled with gossip and putdowns. If there's a person in the group who acts like this, it's pathetic but predictable that the whole gathering can get unpleasant. Some people really seem to crave the energy they get by talking down about other people. And some people do this on a regular basis just because they want to feel energetic. If you observe this happening in your own life, it's worth it to take a deep breath. Say a prayer at this point to ask God what to say to counter the negativity. Pray for something that will cause a complete reset of the group conversation. Do we need to protect ourselves from our own family members? How can we set boundaries and be loving about it? How do we transcend older boundaries and reset them to allow more mutual respect and hope for each other's well-being? Maybe you would let your auntie squeeze you in a giant hug when you were little, but now you don't want her to do that - a simple handshake would be much better.

We need to turn everyone's hearts in a more productive and uplifting direction. It starts from loving other people no-matter-what which Jesus was very good at. But in Nazareth he couldn't get them to see, even though his family loved him. The other people were offended. And I think some of the people in his family were offended too. You can be offended by the people you love the most. Not only do they press your buttons, they are the ones who put those buttons on you in the first place! Sometimes I think real love only occurs after you work through negative feelings about the other person - once you have seen some intrinsic problems in the other person that you know they cannot easily change about themselves. But in Nazareth they can't get past this. Jesus says he is amazed at their unbelief. This reminds me of a story: My friend Susan got her PhD in Computer Science at Purdue. She was a very well-rounded person, and among other things she had this story about how she had found a school bus with the keys left in the ignition. I don't remember the details, except that it was a long story that was really hilarious. Anyway, Susan was dating another PhD student and eventually they decided to get married. At the wedding, somebody came up to her and said, "What ever happened to your sister, the one who stole

the school bus?" Susan said, "That was me..." The person said, "But that's impossible, that girl wasn't going to ever get through college, etc. etc." Susan was shocked, needless to say. Well, young people change a lot, and become a lot more responsible. That's why we seal juvenile records, and it's why we need to keep our eyes open for any little sign of growth in young people and nurture any good seeds that you see growing in them.

Jesus knows how to grow these seeds in his disciples, and in the rest of the passage he tells them to go out into unfamiliar territory and DO SOME GOOD OUT THERE! He says each one of them should find a friend and travel as a pair. Any mom would say that you need to take extra clothes, food, water, money and a good strong backpack. But Jesus is very challenging. He says don't take anything extra, just the clothes on your back and a pair of good sandals. Jesus says don't take two tunics - this is a big shirt like a nightgown, and it's what most people wore. Jesus seems to think each pair will be able to find people on the road who will help them, let them stay, and also let the disciples work with the people in these villages. He had taught them how to heal and cast out demons. Now I think a lot of this worked because Jesus disciples learned how to be travelling nurse-practitioners, and also how to be counselors and therapists to the people in these villages. Notice that this is pleasing to God, and Jesus knows it is a challenge for these disciples. It serves to amplify His message - love one another as I have loved you, feed my lambs, the kingdom of heaven is at hand! And the best news is that any one of us can probably do it if we aren't afraid to try. I'd like to ask you to think of some practical things you can do for other people: (pass a mike around, if nobody wants to contribute read from the following list)

- listen deeply and talk sympathetically to somebody who is experiencing difficulty in their lives.
- run the dishwasher after coffee hour
- give a ride to somebody who doesn't have a car
- Visit an elderly person and try to make it easier for them to live healthy. Are they getting enough water to drink? Are they able to eat nutritious food, handle their medications, etc.?
- Tutor a young person, help them get their grades up
- Help carry things

When we put both parts of this gospel passage together, more comparisons and contrasts come up. Jesus can't do miracles in his own hometown. However, the disciples are able to do miracles in strange towns. What is this like for them? Are they laying down roots in these new places? Is it going to make it hard for them to go back home and truly be happy? Would their family and friends be able to tap into the disciples' gifts and allow themselves to be healed? Do the disciples feel proud or instead do they feel humbled and honored?

I'm going to close with a Catholic reflection that was written by Fr. Ken Untener for a Mass for Deceased Priests in 1979.

It's called

Prophets of a Future Not Our Own

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

(This prayer was first presented by Cardinal Dearden in 1979 and quoted by Pope Francis in 2015. This reflection is an excerpt from a homily written for Cardinal Dearden by then-Fr. Ken Untener on the occasion of the Mass for Deceased Priests, October 25, 1979. Pope Francis quoted Cardinal Dearden in his remarks to the Roman Curia on December 21, 2015. Fr. Untener was named bishop of Saginaw, Michigan, in 1980.)

Now I invite you to ponder these contradictions over the next week and find something you can do in the name of Jesus, whether it's a big thing or a small thing.