

Unit 4

Part 2 Message of the Prophets

Facilitator: Helene Hedlund

Bible Text:

- **1 Kings 11:1-13;**
- **Amos 1:1; 5:21-24; 8:1-18;**
- **Hosea 1:1-9; 4:1-3;**
- **Jeremiah 11:18-23; 15:15-21**

Lesson Focus: When the rulers of Israel ignored God's prophets, Israel was lost.

Big Question: What would a prophet say to us today?

Key Words: PROPHET, JUDGMENT, JUSTICE

Background Information

In the Old Testament, prophets were appointed by God (often at a very young age) to speak on behalf of God. Prophets informed the kings about what God wanted for the people—advice the kings didn't always follow. There was no official prophet selection process, which often led to some significant skepticism about the credentials of those who claimed to speak for God.

The context for the rise of the prophets is laid out in Deuteronomy 18:15-22, which details the transition from Moses' leadership among the people to the leadership of others. Moses was so central to the development and identity of God's people that there was likely a great deal of fear and anxiety about what would become of them after he died. This passage is God's reassurance that, just as God raised up Moses, God will call others to speak to the people on God's behalf. As with Moses, the prophets' words would be a sign of God's presence in and among the people. For the most part, prophets existed on the margins of the community, yet they were still integrally connected to the community. They weren't charismatic figures who popped up out of nowhere seeking glory or recognition. They were committed to the restoration of the people of God. Their sole purpose was to compel and shape the people of God for covenantal fidelity by speaking the word of God. That means the prophets stood within a tradition that ultimately gets picked up in the New Testament with Jesus.

Today, we think of prophets as being a little off. And they might have been. But the prophets were also people of imagination. They inspired hope and offered new ways of seeing otherwise bleak circumstances. They deconstructed narratives, and in their place offered stories of restoration and renewal. Their laments expressed the darkness of life in captivity and pointed to the light of God's voice and God's presence. Prophets imagined a new day, where God's intention for the world would be realized. Prophets had the courage to call out problems for what they were, but also the audacity to hope in the face of it all.

- As leadership of the Israelites passed from Moses to others, God provided prophets to continue to guide the people. So while they didn't lead like Moses or rule like kings, they did serve a crucial role in the history of God's people. The words of the prophets shifted the perception of reality ever so slightly to reveal something distinct, new, and ultimately more true.
- Another metaphor could be the prophet as gardener. Prophets till and retill the "soil" of people's hearts and lives, turning it over and over again to let what is ultimately lasting and good emerge and grow. Their disruptive presence is always motivated by the intention that something good will grow out of what they have disrupted. This is a good rule of thumb even today as we listen to people who claim to speak for God: What do their words point to—justice, mercy, and peace, or something else? Students live in a world where the church's public sway is decreasing in a number of ways. However, prophets had significant authority—it was important that the people be able to trust the words of the prophets as messages from God.

True prophets were not necessarily easy to recognize. In fact, the only way to know if a prophet was truly from God was after the fact—if the prophet's words came true!

Summary

- The modern view of prophets can create a bias against taking the biblical prophets seriously. The term gets used in all sorts of circles—sports, the church, politics—and it usually means very little. Ancient prophets had a specific role in their communities. They never worked for their own gain but always for the good of the community.
- There is some strange stuff in the prophetic books of the Bible—images of death and violence and destruction that rival the most graphic video games and movies.
- There's a great opportunity for you to recognize that you have a role as prophets in your communities as well. While they aren't necessarily called out to speak for God, they do have a voice and a vision for what it could mean to be the people of God in this day.

Additional Bible Reading

Read Deuteronomy 18:15-22.

1. Why is it necessary for God to raise up a prophet in this situation?
2. What does God promise the people about the prophets?
3. Why would the people be frightened by a false prophet?

Read Ezekiel 37:1-14

1. What do you think "dry bones" is supposed to mean?
2. Why would God want Ezekiel to prophesy to those bones?
3. What did Ezekiel's prophecy mean?

Discussion Questions

- Do prophets speak the word of God or the *words* of God?
- How do we know if somebody is a prophet?
- Does God still use/need prophets in the world today?

Prophets always spoke on behalf of God— never themselves. The messages they relayed were sometimes harsh—challenging injustice and warning God’s covenant people of the consequences of disobedience. But they also communicated a message of grace—that is, the abiding goodness of God’s promises.

CONSEQUENCES

Because the messages prophets communicated on behalf of God often included colorful descriptions of the disasters that would befall the people if they didn’t change their ways, prophets were regularly scorned and even rejected by their own communities.

Prophecy in the Present

There’s no denying that God used prophets to proclaim messages of radical justice and overflowing grace. But is God still speaking through prophets today? If so, can *anybody* become a prophet? Can *you*?