

Biblical Text: Zechariah 7:8-14

8 The word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying: 9 Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; 10 do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. 11 But they refused to listen, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears in order not to hear. 12 They made their hearts adamant in order not to hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great wrath came from the Lord of hosts. 13 Just as, when I called, they would not hear, so, when they called, I would not hear, says the Lord of hosts, 14 and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and a pleasant land was made desolate.

SERMON

Here we are near the end of a series about the lesser known prophets. My name is Mark Fraley. I am a second year seminary student at McCormick Theological Seminary seeking ordination.

I feel a moment of reckoning in the world. So reading from the prophets made sense to me. At the beginning of COVID, I found myself reading the Book of Isaiah. I am a white man who grew up with tremendous privilege and opportunities. I have not faced the same experiences as those with whom I do not share the same identity of race or gender or sexual identity. I have been on a journey to change and to live out the teachings of Christ. I have spent the last twenty years of my life as a community organizer in multi-racial groups fighting to improve schools, ensure folks have decent housing, and to hold intransigent politicians and greedy business leaders accountable. I am new to the work of preaching. As I preach about the words of Zechariah and my own journey regarding racial injustice, my words will be flawed and imperfect.

When I took on this preaching assignment, I thought, “I want to preach from a prophet about whom I know very little. Not Jonah, not Micah, not Amos.” I picked Zechariah. Then I began to read Zechariah. Scholars believe Zechariah was a priest called by God to encourage the Israelites to move back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. The Book of Zechariah is messy and confusing. It has fantastic images arising from his experiences with angels and God. At first, I hoped to decipher them, to explain them, and talk about their relevancy to this moment. I would have been talking about

- Scrolls the size of trucks flying through the sky
- Horses meant to protect the world

Honestly, it all sounds like a weirdly surreal movie. I wanted to interpret these visions for you. To be honest, I had no idea where to begin.

And then I read this passage. And I could not stop thinking about it. Because as strange and fantastic as those other images were to understand, these lines appear even harder for us to live out:

- Render true judgments
- Show kindness and mercy to one another
- Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien or the poor, and
- Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

These are not weak recommendations. These are mandates coming from God through Zechariah.

Later the text says, “They would not hear, they refused to listen”

And it all felt so human. This is not the first or last time these lines are used in scripture. There is a reason they get repeated.

It reminded me of a recent experience I had which has haunted me.

A few weeks ago, I sat in these bleachers in the middle of a public hearing held by my hometown’s city council. Because of COVID, about 150 socially distanced people gathered in the stadium and many others watched on Zoom as men and women of all ages shared stories about race in my hometown. This happened because over the last five years, three men of color have been killed here by the police. The Black Lives Matter protests increased awareness of this and people began to demand justice. I attended to humbly witness, listen and learn. One African-American woman raised in Wauwatosa spoke of the numerous times she had been pulled over by the police while driving in the city. A young white man spoke of being in his civics class during the Ferguson protests when a police officer described how he and his colleagues used minor vehicle infractions to “deal with certain people.” One mother spoke of how she plans out careful itineraries for her son every time he leaves the house by himself. This way she always knows where he is. Just before the hearing, a member of the church I serve told how her Latino son would often get stopped by police if he rode his bike to school late. Often, they followed him all the way to confirm his story. There were numerous stories like this.

Thinking back on this evening, I could not help but ask, what is the role of the prophet? What is Zechariah doing?

Then I read from the seminal text by Rabbi Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, and gleaned that prophets

- Focus on the life of the whole people
- They hold God and people in one thought
- They declare the word of God here and now, and

- The images they present must not shine, they must burn.

Think about that last line for a moment,
the images they present must not shine, they must burn.

Think about American culture. We love shiny things. I get obsessed with the new shiny things. Shiny captures my attention for a moment. I love getting a new iPhone. I love going to the new superhero movie. Shiny captivates me but leaves me feeling empty. Shiny things make me a passive observer. I often find myself looking for the new and shiny. In the end, I don't change.

But if the image burns, that is different. When I have been burnt, it stings in that moment. It still stings when I put ice on it. That pain lasts for awhile. When I have been burnt badly enough, there is a physical transformation. I get a scar. When I touch the scar, it reminds me of the pain. And my behavior also transforms. I will not repeat that behavior. Burns move us to action. For white Christians, we must act. It is going to burn. I need to ask what actions I have taken in my personal life, how do I spend my money, where do I spend my time, what behaviors and language have I deemed turned a blind eye to, what public policies have I deemed acceptable. Doing this will be painful.

The images presented by the prophet must not be shiny, they must burn.

- Recommendations are shiny. Prophetic mandates burn.
- I worry that the sign with Slogans in my yard is shiny. Racial justice burns.
- I worry just reading books is shiny. Reparations burn.
- Making a conversation comfortable is shiny. The potential cost of disrupting a neighbor's racist comments burns.

The evening in this stadium was full of hurt, sadness and anger. The night was messy. The stories were painful to hear. The evening was not shiny, it burnt.

In wrestling with this Zechariah text, a friend said to me, make your definition of a prophet as simple as possible. As he and I talked, we came to the conclusion prophets don't show up when things are good.

Prophets force people to take a side. Prophets are not looking for a passive audience, they want people to act. Are we ok with people intentionally eliminating voting rights won fifty years ago?

Prophets aim their words at four different audiences:

- In the first group, people have been waiting to hear these words because they have been suffering from the injustices and need to hear God is with them.
- In the second group, people are trying to follow the word of God. They are trying to avoid the shiny things. The prophet's words are both affirming and challenging.
- In the third group, there are people who are incredibly wrapped up in the shiny things. They are trying to lead their lives and they miss the bigger picture. They will realize following the words of the prophet will have a cost. Some will choose to do so and some will not.
- Finally, there is a fourth group, they are the people who the prophet deeply offends. They benefit from the status quo. They don't want life to change. They think the prophet is overreacting and being unreasonable. They want people to focus on the shiny things. They want to get rid of the prophet.

I keep wondering how I have spent the last fifteen years in the neighborhood where I live acting like the people described by Zechariah.

- When did I turn a stubborn shoulder?
- When did I choose not to hear?

I wonder which one of the four groups I am in.

The stories told that night were not new. I had heard there were problems but I did not dig deeper. When I heard those stories, nothing about Wauwatosa was shiny. The stories burnt. I am ashamed and I am embarrassed.

Now, I am asking God to let me live in the discomfort of repenting and then repairing. In this, I realize I must act differently. Because when Zechariah lays out how we should be, he says,

- Render true judgments
- Show kindness and mercy to one another
- Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien or the poor, and
- Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

These are not passive behaviors. These are actions. At no point, does he say be comfortable or enjoy the shiny things. If I look at these mandates and think they are shiny, then there is a good chance I am not paying close enough attention. These mandates require difficult work.

So, I ask you today. Which group are you in? When you reflect on these mandates, are they shiny or do they burn?

As uncomfortable as they make me, thank God for the prophets.

Amen.