

camp because we were joining with the youth at Clark. One day, I had our high school boys and girls out playing flag football, and we were playing on this field. I sort of picked this field to play on. We were there, and this Air Force official came up. He was a sergeant, and he was really angry. He came stalking out to our field, and he said, "Who's in charge here?!" I said, "I am." He said, "You're not supposed to be here! This is not for you!" And I said, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't know." "Yes, this is not for you. You've got to get off this field right now!" And he said, "Come with me!" And so I thought we were going to be further scolded or expelled maybe. He took all of my high school kids and myself through a gate. We got through the gate. It turned out that we had been playing flag football on what was kind of a patio area that was being used for lunches and social events like that for officers. And he said, "You're not supposed to be here!" Then he took us through a gate, and here was this beautiful soccer field that I didn't even know existed. He said, "*Here's* where you're supposed to play!" It had goal posts and everything. I thought to myself, you know, that's a great parable itself of the value of the prophets. The prophets call you into account under the law, so you're guilty. They make us feel guilty, and they scold us sometimes. But wait it out. They have a better playing field for you. They have a better place for you. "Behold! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice, I'll come in and eat with them, and they with me." (Revelation 3:20) There's a better place. Wait it out.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the prophets. Thank you for Jeremiah, that he's a prophet who scolded us for sure, scolded the people, and yet in his purchase of the property at Anathoth we have a sign that the future is in God's hand, and that God knows what he is doing, and he will bring his people back and he will heal them of their wounds and best of all a righteous branch will emerge, and that righteous branch knows how to redeem us and make us whole. Thank you that Jesus Christ our Lord is the fulfillment of Jeremiah's promise. May we experience it. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

1 Luther, Martin. *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*. 1520.
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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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The National Presbyterian Church

Prophets in the Land

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

We're preaching a series of sermons on the story before the grand story, and today we want to look at the prophets in the land. The prophets in the Old Testament play a very big part in the Old Testament story. In fact, when the sacred scriptures are described in the time of the first century, they're always described this way: The law, the prophets, and the writings. The writings would be the psalms, and of course, the proverbs and all. But the law and the prophets, that's the way the sacred scriptures are described. Well, who are these people who are the prophets in Israel? They're remarkable when you think about it. Some of them were priests, but that's the fewer number. For instance, Ezekiel was a priest. But most were lay people. Jeremiah as a matter of fact, we'll look at him in just a moment, is the great-great-grandson of a deposed priest. How would you like that pedigree? It was Solomon who actually evicted the ancestor of Jeremiah out of the Temple of Jerusalem and exiled him to Anathoth eight or nine miles away from Jerusalem. And Jeremiah is, in that family, of a deposed and disgraced priest. Some of the Old Testament prophets wrote books, such as, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Micah. But certain prophets did not write books. We call them "spoken prophets." Some of the most famous are the spoken prophets, like Elijah and Nathan.

You've heard Felix Mendelssohn's "Elijah." This amazing song, "If with all your heart you truly seek me," that is from Mendelssohn's "Elijah." Elijah was a spoken prophet, and probably by the time of the first century, would be the most famous of the prophets. As a matter of fact, in the Seder meal, the empty chair for Messiah is called "the Elijah chair" because Elijah was the forerunner of the Messiah. He did not write a book. Nathan, who we

met two weeks ago, who confronted David, did not write a book, and yet what an important and key prophet he is in the life of Israel. And of course the greatest of all prophets, according to our Lord Jesus Christ is John the Baptist, who did not write a book. So, we have the spoken prophets and the written prophets.

The interesting thing about prophets in the Old Testament is they're both men and women. In fact, by the time of the first century in Chapter 2 of Luke, it's a woman, Anna, who is called the prophet Anna and is the one who makes the key designation of Jesus the little baby as the Christ. That's Anna. Miriam was a prophet. Deborah was a prophet. The women are prophets in the Old Testament as are the men. Today is Reformation Sunday which makes this all the more interesting for us, because in the history of Christendom, there are great Christian traditions in terms of the churches and how the churches have determined what the priesthood or the pastorate would be in the churches. We're in the prophetic tradition as Protestants, not the priestly tradition. As a matter of fact, Peter, when he started the church in Acts chapter two, of all the texts he could have used to begin his Day of Pentecost sermon, the text he uses is from the prophet Joel, and here's how Peter begins his sermon. He says in effect to the people, "This prophecy is now being fulfilled in your eyes. Your young men and your young women will prophesy. That's what I'm fulfilling" (Acts 2:17). And in the New Testament, women were prophets, men were prophets. They were not priests — priests are only men. And so those Christian churches that are in the priestly tradition, their priests would tend to be men. But we're in the prophetic tradition.

We don't see pastors as priests. As Martin Luther said, "We now confess the priesthood of all believers."¹ The priestly role, we believe, is fulfilled when you pray for people. But you're not an intermediary between God and the people, which the priests were. The prophets are the ones who announce the good news of the gospel. They announce and share and teach the implications of the reign of Christ. That's what the prophets do. The priests are different. When you pray, you're in the priestly tradition. But we in Reformation Christianity, our pastors are prophets, teacher prophets. And that's why it's proper that we ordain women to ministry. We should ordain women to ministry, because we are not ordaining them as priests, we're ordaining women as prophets like the men.

Well, what did these prophets say as we go through the Old Testament journey? First of all, they spoke on behalf of God. You heard that in this wonderful text read by two young people today in worship. They read this

this amazing prophesy of hope. He's not finished, though. The prophesy of hope now becomes personal. It becomes totally messianic. In the next line,] *"The days are surely coming," says the Lord, "when I will fulfill the promise I made to the House of Israel and the House of Judah. In those days, at that time, I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David."* [An identical line that we have in Isaiah. "A root of Jesse." Jesse was David's father. By the time of the first century, the messianic hope is seen in Davidic terms. When Peter gives his sermon, he says, "The promises made to David, that one would sit on his throne forever, that promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ" (Acts 2:29-31). And now it is Jeremiah who gets to make this promise.] *In those days, Judah will be saved, and this is the name by which the righteous branch will be called. The Lord is our righteousness. For thus, says the Lord, David shall never lack a man to sit upon his throne forever."* (Jeremiah 32-33:15)

And that man, that messiah, is Jesus Christ.

We believe Jeremiah is a messianic prophet, sharing that word of hope through this living parable. He gets to live out this wonderful parable of hope while he was in prison. He gets to share it. He gets to share this hope. We're uneasy when we hear the scolding words of the prophets. Remember when we talked about the law a few weeks ago? I said the law is wonderful, it's for us, but yet it makes us nervous. The law makes us nervous. We have an uneasy feeling about the law. We love it when it protects us from the marauder. We resent it when we are the marauder, because it calls us into account. This happened when the prophet Nathan confronted David, and David was called into account. So we feel this way also when we hear the prophets. And many people are little bit put off when they read the harsh lines earlier from Jeremiah, or Isaiah, or all of the prophet writings. We say, "It's so harsh. It's so judgmental." As we are being called into account, we are being weighed on the scales, and so we're not sure we want to hear it. But we should wait awhile. We should wait it out. Good news is coming.

Can I tell you a story? When I was a pastor in Manila, I had a marvelous group of high school kids in our church, the Union Church in Manila, and we collaborated with the chaplain at Clark Air Base, which was the large Air Force base north of Manila. We would hold youth conferences together in Baguio at the great Air Force recreational base called Camp John Hay. It now belongs to the Philippine Air Force, but it was then a U.S. Air Force recreational base in the mountains, 5,000 ft. of elevation in Baguio, and people would come for R&R. I was in Manila from 1964-70 during the Vietnam War, and many guys would come from Vietnam for R&R at Camp John Hay. We had the right to take our high school kids to that

esting. In Jeremiah 32, we have this:

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah. It was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar, and the time of the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard. [One of his many imprisonments]. The Lord came to him and said, 'Hanamel, the son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say buy my field which is in Anathoth for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.' [Anathoth is about eight miles away from Jerusalem]. *Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard in accordance with the word of the Lord and said, 'Buy my field that is in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin for the right of possession, and redemption is yours. Buy it for yourself.' And then I knew it was the word of the Lord. So I bought the field at Anathoth.* [It's a kind of irony here in all of this. Anathoth, some seven or eight miles from Jerusalem, is where the Babylonian army is camped. It makes you wonder if that cousin is a little bit of a dishonest real estate agent. He comes to Jeremiah in prison, and he may think that Jeremiah probably doesn't know what's going on out there, and he says, "You know, they've got a nice piece of property out here. I can get a good loan rate for you on this one, because you have a right to buy it. It's your uncle's property, and I think you should buy it and grab it while you can." But he doesn't tell him that, by the way, the Babylonian troops who are camped on that property right now are about ready to destroy this city.] *The Lord had given that dream and said, "When they come, you should buy it." "So I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and I weighed out the money to him.* [It's very interesting. He goes into all the detail of how much he paid and how he did the weighing of the shekels and how it was witnessed. All the deeds of purchase were witnessed.] *I went through all of that, and in their presence, I charged Baruch, [that's his assistant] saying, 'Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, take these deeds, both the sealed deed of purchase and the open deed and put them in an earthenware jar.'* [A little bit like the Dead Sea Scrolls. They were all found in earthenware jars.] *That they may last for a long time. For thus saith the Lord, the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel.*" [Now folks, hold your breath.] *Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. Therefore, thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning this city of which you say it is being given into the hand of the king of Babylon by sword, by famine, and by pestilence, see I am going to gather them from all the lands from which I drove them in my anger, in my wrath, and in my indignation, and I will bring them back to this place, and I will settle them in safety, and they will be my people, and I will be their God.* [By that lived-out parable, Jeremiah is permitted to give

great text. By the way, Jeremiah began his prophetic role as a very small boy. In fact, he complains and says, "I'm just a boy. How can I be a prophet? I thought you had to be trained to be a prophet?" (Jeremiah 1:6). No. If the Lord puts his word in your mouth, you can be a prophet. And that is what the prophets do. They speak the word of God. And that's why you'll hear in the prophets, "Thus saith the Lord." They speak on behalf of God. They announce the implications of the kingly reign of God. You saw that in Nathan when he told his parable to David after David's terrible sin. Like a teacher he is playing the role of interpreting the law to David. Interpreting the will of God to King David. So the prophets are very bold. They speak to the kings, they speak to the priests, they speak to the people.

The prophets also call the people to repent; there is a strong repentance theme in all of the books of the prophets. When you read the prophetic books, there is always the call to us to repent of our sins. Now this is not their most popular role. The prophets in the Old Testament also announce the judgment of God upon our sins. That's what David heard from Nathan. It's what we hear from Jeremiah. It's what we hear from Isaiah. The word of judgment is given by the prophets. This is the part we don't like as much as the words of hope, but the prophets have that role to play. They announce the judgment of God. You see, for instance, in Isaiah where the people come to worship, and God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah says,

Why have you come, trampling my courts? You've got blood on your hands. I don't want your solemn assembly while you have blood on your hands. Wash yourselves and make yourselves clean, and then you can come into my presence. [And the people don't know what to do. Then he says,] *"Come and let us reason together. Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.* (Isaiah 1:12-18)

But first comes the word of judgment and the call to repentance. Judgment is in the prophetic message, and then as most of the next sentence follows, the message of hope.

Now here's something interesting. The message of hope in the prophetic teaching is almost always right next to the message of judgment. And it comes by surprise. That's why they often talk about the apocalyptic nature of the prophets' writings. I'll give you an example from Isaiah. In Isaiah 6, the Great Theophany of Isaiah:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord high and lifted up. And the Lord said, 'Who will go for us?' And Isaiah says, "Here am I. Send me!" [So now Isaiah is going to become a prophet.] And then the word comes from God, "Say this to the people: That they're under judgment for their sins.

Their cities will lie waste. They're like an oak tree that will be burned to the stump, and then the stump will be burned again." And Isaiah says, "How long do I have to tell them that? Until cities lie waste without inhabitant." [It's an overwhelming picture of judgment and it sounds so grim until the last line. In the very last line, a surprise enters. After the Lord says to Isaiah that cities will lie waste without inhabitant, the stump of the tree is there, it's burned again, only a stump left. Ah!) "*But the holy seed is in the stump.*" (Isaiah 6:1-13)

And then Isaiah gets the message of a root of Jesse. See, Jesse was the father of David. A root of Jesse will spring up out of dry ground. And so it's that same Isaiah who a couple chapters later will say,

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light ... For unto us a child is born. Unto us a son is given. The government will be upon his shoulders. He'll be named Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:2,6)

That wonderful word of hope comes right after judgment, and you'll see that throughout the prophetic message.

The word of judgment and then hope. It's true in the New Testament, too. In the Book of Revelation, chapter 3, one of the seven churches, the Laodicean church, is a very bad church. In fact, speaking on behalf of the Holy Spirit, John says to that church,

I know your works. You're not hot nor cold, therefore I'm going to spit you out of my mouth! [That's a pretty overwhelming judgment. What could be worse than that? "I'm going to spit you out of my mouth." That's what the Lord says to the church of Laodicea. Do you know what the next sentence is?] *Behold! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.* (Revelation 3:15-16,20)

It is the most beautiful invitation to receive forgiveness and wholeness and food from God. But it comes right after judgment. So you'll see that in the prophetic message. You'll see it in Jeremiah, you'll see it in Isaiah — in all the prophets.

Jeremiah is one of the greatest of the prophets. He lived at a very hard and harsh time. He's also a historian and narrates the final days of Judah before Judah was destroyed in 586 B.C. We know the date very well: 586 B.C. The Neo-Babylonian Empire swept through the Holy Land. Before that, a hundred years earlier, they had destroyed the north, then they came to the

south, Judah. They surrounded the city of Jerusalem, they starved it out, which was the kind of warfare that was used in those days. They called it a siege. They starved the people out, and then destroyed the city, literally leveled it.

You know Solomon's Temple, which we learned about last week, was destroyed by the Babylonians, never again to rise. In fact, the Western Wall in Jerusalem, which is the Wailing Wall, the most sacred site for modern Judaism, is not the great stones from Solomon's Temple. Though it's built where Solomon's Temple was, it's the stones from Herod's Temple of the first century. Solomon's Temple was leveled. And the people, those who weren't killed were taken off captive to Babylon for 70 years of captivity. So Jeremiah is a prophet during that time. He writes two books: The Book of Jeremiah that narrates the fall of the city, and then he writes the very profound and sad book called the Book of Lamentations when he weeps after the fall of the city of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah starts young. He starts as a very young prophet, and then he carries on his life in the city. He's not popular. He spends most of his time in jail. He actually is jailed most of the time because he is the prophet of judgment, and he's calling out to the people to repent for their sins and announcing their sins to them and saying their city's going to be destroyed. False prophets say that Jeremiah is a false prophet because he is so gloomy. Jeremiah is very dramatic in the way he carries out his prophesy. In one of the most famous scenes as Jeremiah announces the fact that God is judging the city, he comes into the court one day when he's still not in prison (though he ends up getting put in prison for this), he comes into the court wearing a yoke around his neck as a kind of parable. It's a leather and wooden yoke like an ox would have, and he walks into the courtyard wearing it. And he says, "Thus saith the Lord, because of your sins, you are going to be taken captive and you're going to be in captivity to the Babylonians because of your sins." One of the opposing prophets comes up to Jeremiah who also has a sense of theatre, and takes that yoke off of Jeremiah's neck, breaks it and says, "See, Jeremiah? It's not true. We're invincible. Nobody will take us captive. Yet, Jeremiah, not to be undone, the next day he decides to come in the court of the king again. This time, he wears a yoke of iron! His famous yoke of iron. He says, "Now try to break that! No, God is bringing judgment to you" (Jeremiah 28).

So Jeremiah has a number of these lived-out parables he has that are judgments, but he has one parable he lives out that is a parable of hope, of total hope. And that one I want to read to you because I think it's just very inter-