

Mark 6:1-13

A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country.

What does it mean to be a prophet? What makes a prophet so special? Why are they not without honor? What would a prophet here, in our own country, look like?

Do prophets predict the future, staring at tea leaves or crystal balls? Are they crazy people who live in the desert, or on the street corner, and spout gibberish, yelling about condemnation and judgment? Are they wonder workers, raising the dead, curing the sick? Are they people who see mysterious visions of unexplainable things?

As for telling the future, yes, prophets sometimes predict the future. They do not, however, use pools of ink or crystal balls. Neither are their predictions events which are set in stone or unavoidable. They are warnings about where we are headed. Prophecies often begin, "Unless you repent and turn again to the Lord your God. . ." What do you see in the coming years for our nation, our city, our church? Have you told anybody? Do they know that a prophet has walked among them?

But prophets do more than predict the future. What about the image of a prophet as a wild hairy man yelling, "Repent, the end is near?" Prophets are indeed a wild bunch. Ezekiel shaved his head with a sword, John the Baptist ate bugs. Prophets earn their image as crazy people. Breakers of taboos, and violators of norms. How might we be radical in our own land? Defy societal expectation so that the words of prophesy will be heard and they know a prophet has walked among them?

But prophets are much more. Prophets are healers and workers of wonders. Elijah provided a widow with endless food and brought her dead son back to life. He called down fire from heaven. How do we work wonders in our own hometown?

Yes, prophets sometimes see spectacular visions. Strange visions, that are beyond understanding. Right before today's reading, when Ezekiel received his commission, he was surrounded by living creatures with assorted mixtures of heads and bodies. He saw wheels within wheels, and fell on his face before the fiery glory of the splendor of the Lord. What visions inspire us, calling us to speak more, do more, be more?

But prophets are still more. At their most basic, beyond foretelling the future, above the apparent insanity, deeper than the visions, Prophets are givers and interpreters of the will of God. That is what makes prophets different from Nostradamus or tarot card readers. That is what separates prophets from mad men. That is what makes prophets different from magicians and illusionists. It is what elevates prophets above visionaries or users of mind-expanding drugs. Prophets reveal and interpret the will of God and what it means for our lives and actions.

Jesus, as the Word of God made flesh, is not only a prophet, but the fulfillment of all prophesy.

And as his followers, we also are called to reveal and interpret the Word of God to a hostile and rebellious world. We are called to be prophets in our own time and our own hometown.

But how?

Modern prophets do not fit the stereotype. But modern prophets exist. I've seen one.

One hot steamy Florida afternoon, I had stopped at a convenience store to get some ibuprofen for a headache. The daily thunderstorm had just begun and several people had gone into the store to escape the rain.

One of the customers, a Latino migrant worker, hot and tired from a day of work, had gotten a beer from the fridge and was standing in line at the register in front of me.

The man didn't speak English and was having some trouble understanding the girl behind the counter. As people often do, to make herself understood she began to speak louder.

The man eventually understood how much he owed for the beer, counted out the change and handed it to the girl. She accepted his money, and then, entirely on purpose, she somehow managed to drop it on the floor on his side of the counter.

He bent to retrieve the money and the girl began to laugh with her coworker behind the counter.

The man again gave her the change and signaled that he needed the bottle opener that a previous customer had left on the opposite corner. The signal was clear and unmistakable, but the girl pretended not to understand, telling the man to "Use your words and learn English"

The other shoppers in the store including some of the man's coworkers began to murmur to one another.

Eventually, unable to pretend any longer, the girl picked up the opener. and he reached out his hand to take it. The girl then put the opener under the counter and pointing to the much-ignored sign, told the man that he was not allowed to open bottles on the premises.

The man could no longer pretend that all he faced was a language barrier and, leaving his beer, he backed away from the counter.

The girl and her friend laughed, "That's right, go back where you belong."

The man, now obviously hurt and angry and embarrassed, and chased by the laughter of the cashier was walking stiffly toward the door, when a voice from the back of the store thundered, "IN THE NAME OF JESUS, STOP!"

Immediately, the store fell silent.

The murmuring of the customers stopped.

The man stopped.

The cashier behind the counter stood shocked.

Everyone turned to see a young man in a suit carrying a gallon of milk walking to the front of the store.

He said, "Please, in the name of Jesus, this man is hot and tired and thirsty. All he wants is a cold beer after work."

Without saying a word, the girl beckoned to the migrant worker, and as he came back to the counter she opened the beer herself, and handed it to him.

He left with his friends.

The well-dressed man laid his money on the counter and followed him out the door.

The store remained as silent as a whisper as the rest of us paid our bills and walked out into the puddles left by the passing storm.

This is what we, the followers of the Word of God, are called to.

Is it a prediction of the future? Without a doubt. After all, it shows the way to the Kingdom of God.

It is crazy? Yes, as the world judges. But we do not judge as the world judges but as the Spirit of God teaches us.

Is it miraculous? Ask the migrant worker.

Is it visionary? It is a more real glimpse of the kingdom of God than the most fantastic Biblical vision.

Will it make you popular with your friends and co-workers? I doubt it.

Is it easy? No, but it is who we are now. We are no longer children, but children of God and bearers of His Word, workers of deeds of power

Take your staff and go, some will hear you, some won't, but make them know that prophets have walked among them.