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Ordinary Prophets, Extraordinary Lives

HOWARD R. MACY

I will propose in this essay that the lives of the prophets, or more precisely, the practical results of the spirituality of the prophets, can guide our own living as followers of Christ. They can supply insights which can help interpret our experience, and they can hold out vistas of possibilities for growth which we may not yet have realized.

As I sometimes warn my students, I should caution that understanding the prophets may corrupt your life. Just about the time you've caught on to what the prophets are doing, you discover that they've caught you. Once you know what the prophets knew by heart, a revolution begins which cannot fully be resisted or undone.

The Bible suggests that with the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, God intended to initiate a revolutionary community of prophets. Moses once exclaimed wistfully, "Would that all the people of God were prophets" (Numbers 11:29). The prophet Joel later promised a day when the Spirit would enable all the people to dream dreams, to have visions, and to prophesy (Joel 3:1-2). And Peter explained to the puzzled crowd at Pentecost that the promise of Joel was even then being fulfilled. As Katherine Dyckman and Patrick Carroll write:

"All of us Christians, not just some 'specially chosen,' are called to be deeply united to God in prayer and to speak out of that prayer with some strand of prophetic voice. Everyone is called to be both mystic and prophet" (*Inviting the Mystic, Supporting the Prophet*, 86).

The whole Christian community is called, in some measure, to prophetic life and witness. Understanding the practical spirituality of the prophets can help us understand how to follow this call.

Even to attempt to see the prophets as guides for discipleship may seem odd, however, because the reality of the prophetic life is so frequently obscured by caricatures which make the prophets seem wholly unlike ourselves. Unlike ourselves, for example, we may regard them as people who are particularly susceptible to paranormal experiences or particularly adept at taking dictation from God. Or we might see them as people like the “saints,” whose level of devotion and obedience would melt down any device designed to measure normal human holiness.

Perhaps the most common caricature of the prophets is to present them as religious soothsayers, as purveyors of predictions, timetables, and secret codes revealing when the world will end. The average mom-and-pop Christian bookstore reveals how widespread this caricature is when it fills its so-called “prophecy” shelves with books which speculate coyly that the end of time is just around the corner.

Another common caricature which obscures the prophets is to see them as primarily social activists and town cranks. It is true that Jeremiah called himself a “man of strife and dissension” (Jeremiah 15:10), and that others stood in conflict with the powers that be. But it is not accurate to present the prophets primarily as social critics. Nor should we say that the personality characteristic that qualifies them to be prophets is being strident or perpetually grumpy.

Soothsayer and activist are caricatures on the opposite ends of a continuum, and neither one accurately portrays the prophets. Unfortunately, even more scholarly descriptions often obscure the prophets as well, by failing to take into account the passion, empowerment, and obedience that were essential to the prophetic experience. Through the various approaches of modern biblical criticism, we have learned a lot that is genuinely helpful about prophetic methods, speech forms, cultural assumptions, and even social role. On balance, however, the empirical, arm’s-length analysis of the prophets offered by the history-of-religions approach has often proved antiseptic and sterile. It too easily betrays and trivializes the prophetic sensibilities and motivations. As an extreme example, one exceptionally skeptical scholar at a recent professional meeting wondered aloud whether the prophets even existed. There are happy exceptions to such weaknesses in biblical scholarship, of course. Abraham Heschel and Walter Brueggemann, for example, offer penetrating interpretations of prophetic experience.

Setting caricatures aside, who were the biblical prophets? What was their place in Israel? Consider this as a working definition: the prophets were people who signaled and embodied God’s active presence and pur-

poses in the world. They pointed to and were themselves flesh-and-blood messages of what God was up to.

We might also ask who the biblical prophets were in a more personal way. This essay's title, "Ordinary Prophets, Extraordinary Lives," suggests both my interest and my answer. We must be modest about an answer, since our direct evidence is limited. However, what we do know suggests that the prophets were just ordinary folk. Amos identifies himself as a shepherd and a person who tends sycamore fig trees. Micah, too, was from rural and small-town Judah. Elisha was plowing behind oxen when he was called to prophesy. Jeremiah grew up in a small village near Jerusalem. He was from a priestly family whose ancestor Abiathar had been kicked out of both Jerusalem and the high priesthood by Solomon. Scholars often suggest that Isaiah may have been from an important family, but that seems noteworthy largely because it's unusual.

These are ordinary people who learned to live with extraordinary faithfulness. As God became the Center of their ordinary experience, they were able to live with boldness and courage, with integrity and loyal love which modeled the call to faithfulness they urged on Israel. On balance, we should also say that, being ordinary, they lived this way often in the face of mystery and puzzlement, of fear and disappointment.

We should expect the prophets to be ordinary, of course. The Bible often shows how God delights in using unlikely people to do unexpected things. Think of Moses, Deborah, Gideon, David, Elijah, and many others. This is so common that it might be regarded as a literary motif, though, even as a motif, it is firmly grounded in the reality of the Israelites' experience.

In the Old Testament we have stories and written records of the messages of many of the prophets. Of others we have only names and the sketchiest vignettes. Many others we know nothing at all about, though the Old Testament is clear that there were many more than are mentioned specifically in the Bible. The evidence also suggests that prophecy was a diverse phenomenon in Israel. Apparently some had all or part of their livelihood from helping people seek God's guidance, from teaching, perhaps from interceding with God on behalf of others. Some were even on the government payroll in the service of the king. For others, like Amos, prophecy was their vocation but not their business. Some may well have trained for prophecy; others clearly did not.

Whatever else we may say, however, the prophets from whom we have stories and messages in the Old Testament were not merely filling a professional role or performing a socially constructed religious duty. They were people who operated out of an encounter with God which grounded and oriented their whole experience. We may describe four movements or stages which characterized the prophetic experience. They are encounter,

vision, conversion, and witness. Perhaps they are not rigidly sequential, but I believe they helpfully suggest the transformation at work in prophetic spirituality.

Encounter

If we are to understand and learn from prophetic spirituality, we must begin by exploring the experience of *encounter*. In his classic work *The Prophets*, Abraham Heschel writes:

“The prophets had no theory or ‘idea’ of God. What they had was an *understanding*. Their God-understanding was not the result of a theoretical inquiry, of a groping in the midst of alternatives about the being and attributes of God. To the prophets, God was overwhelmingly real and shatteringly present. They never spoke of Him as from a distance. They lived as witnesses, struck by the words of God, rather than as explorers engaged in an effort to ascertain the nature of God; their utterances were the unloading of a burden rather than glimpses obtained in the fog of groping” (I, 1).

Again from Heschel: “To the prophet, knowledge of God was fellowship with Him, not attained by syllogism, analysis or induction, but by living together” (I, 3).

Sometimes interpreters have described prophetic ideals or the achievements of ethical monotheism in the prophets without seeing them in the context of this encounter. Unfortunately, this misses entirely the root of the prophets’ experience. The prophets did not discover or create a set of principles. And, though they cherished the traditions of Israel, they did not simply recall the guidance of Torah. They confronted, or better, were confronted by the Creator of the universe. They met face to face the One who, as Amos writes, “makes the Pleiades and Orion,” (5:8, *New Jerusalem Bible*, here and in all quotations) who “forges the mountains, creates the wind, who reveals his mind to humankind, changes the dawn into darkness and strides on the heights of the world” (4:13).

We have relatively few reports of these confrontations – some direct reports of prophetic call, some reflections on the meaning of the prophetic vocation, and evidence in the prophets’ speeches of understandings that can only be had at first hand. Though the reports are not abundant, they are remarkably consistent in what they portray. These encounters overwhelmed the prophets. The encounters were blind-siding, breath-sucking, gut-jarring; they were full of energy, creativity, and crazy surprise; they intermingled fear and attraction, tenderness and amazement. They had the same effect as Job’s encounter when God completely overwhelmed him in the whirlwind speeches, and Job responded, “Before, I knew you only by hearsay, but now, having seen you with my own eyes, I retract what I have

said, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5). Out of such experiences the prophets became “God-blinded souls,” to use Thomas Kelly’s phrase.

I believe it would be a mistake to see these encounters as conversion experiences in the sense of initiating a relationship of faithfulness to God. To extend the example of Job (who is not among the prophets), right after he says he has seen God with his own eyes, he repents; but we must remember that, in God’s opinion, Job was already the most righteous person in the whole world. In that same light we may understand Isaiah’s response to his vision of God enthroned, when he says, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh Sabaoth” (Isaiah 6:5). He is overawed by the holy immediacy of God. It is in the context of this experience that Isaiah accepts a prophetic mission. Reflecting on his own call, Amos also suggests the power of knowing God shatteringly present: “The lion roars, who is not afraid? Lord Yahweh has spoken: who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8)

Just as they are overmatched by God’s presence, so they are overmatched by what God is asking of them. Often we hear the tone of astonishment and surprise. “Who me? Do what? Who am I to do this? Surely you have the wrong person! I’m too young. I’m a nobody. I can’t talk. Why in the world would they believe me?” The language of resistance, born of a sense of inadequacy and fear, usually is answered by God’s reassurance, tenderness, and unwavering command. “Go ahead and do what I say. Don’t be afraid. I am with you.” In the encounter, apparently the prophets are both drawn and compelled. It smacks of both attraction and coercion. Jeremiah, for example, says of his call, “You have seduced me, Yahweh, and I have let myself be seduced ...” (Jeremiah 20:7) and “When your words came, I devoured them: your word was my delight and the joy of my heart; for I was called by your Name, Yahweh, God Sabaoth” (Jeremiah 15:16). But he also says “You forced me...” “You have overpowered me: you were the stronger” (20:7). At some points the prophets seem to step forward to accept their role. At other points they seem to be dragged backward, kicking and screaming, into their vocation.

The encounter with God not only resulted in specific instructions or guidance, but the very fact of the encounter was the unshakable cornerstone in the prophets’ conviction that God is fully present in the world in power and love. This was not hearsay, but immediate experience which undergirded their entire prophetic lives.

We should not view such encounters simply as one-time experiences, even though some of them represent a major turning point. Indeed, the prophet clearly carries on a continuing relationship of intimacy with God in which the prophet’s life and ministry has its sustenance. Neither should we give the impression that all such encounters are dramatic. Part of the significance of Elijah’s encounter with God at Mt. Horeb (or Sinai) is precisely

that it did not share the lightning-and-thunder drama of Moses' meeting with God there some centuries before. Elijah experienced a terrifying storm and earthquake and fire, but God did not meet him in those. The encounter came, instead, in the "still, small voice," "the sound of gentle stillness" (1 Kings 19). It reminds us that God is not limited to pyrotechnics, audible voices, and wide-screen, technicolor visions. The inner voice, the whispered words, the profound sense of God's presence – all can be equally weighty. Whether dramatic or more hidden, these experiences of encounter give those who receive them a sense of rootedness. They help to reveal what is ultimately significant. They point the way to true north. And they are fundamental to prophets ancient and modern.

To anticipate a bit, we can identify such encounters in later persons whom we might regard as prophets. We might also reflect on the encounters with God that we ourselves have experienced and the role they play in setting our direction and loyalties.

Vision

After the encounter comes *vision*. This is the next major movement in a prophet's experience. Vision emerges from encounter with God in at least three ways: first, as a reordering of reality, of the nature of the world itself; second, as a new capacity for discernment; and finally, as a capacity to imagine what is yet possible, what Brueggemann refers to as the "prophetic imagination" (*The Prophetic Imagination*).

(1) The first of these types of vision, *a reordering of reality*, is fundamentally the same phenomenon that Paul refers to in Romans 12 as the "renewing of the mind." It is coming to a profoundly altered way of seeing the world. Goethe is quoted as saying, "Few people have the imagination for reality," and I believe it is true. Even when the abstraction of the prophets' ideas may not seem remarkably different, we need to recognize that a great chasm cuts between cognitive and experiential knowledge. To refer to Heschel again, these were not "ideas," which can be quite superficial, but "understandings." What the prophets learned from their experience of God deeply affected their world view and their behavior. In my study, I have concluded that most of the prophetic message and understanding of reality can be gathered under three great insights.

(a) The first is that the prophets understood *the nearness of God*. They knew that God was actively and notoriously present in the world with sovereign power. Nothing escapes God's notice. God notices the routine slights of justice that nobody else gives a second thought to any more. God sees the plight of hidden, vulnerable people as well as the hidden crimes of prominent people. Nothing is out of God's reach. The unrivaled superpower can be brought down in an instant, and its king can go directly from a lavish state dinner to Sheol where he'll be lunch for worms and maggots. So the

prophets opposed those who scoff at God's power, thinking they can do whatever they want with impunity. They tried to lift the faltering trust of those who think that God's active presence in the world is not sufficient to meet their need. Because they had encountered God shatteringly present, the prophets were convinced of the nearness of God.

(b) The prophets were also convinced that *God's purposes in the world are loving*. As they encountered and walked in intimacy with God, their hearts were molded to God's heart, and they learned about loyal love, mercy, and compassion. They learned to delight in the things that God delights in – steadfast love, justice, and righteousness (Jeremiah 9:23-24). They learned that God is lovingly working to restore all of creation, and that even judgment and justice are part of mercy. Their visions of restoration and reconciliation are glimpses into the heart of Eternity. They are echoes of the home from which humankind wandered when we wanted to be out on our own. The prophets witnessed first-hand the God who pursues all of creation with love and who stands ready, arms open wide, to embrace us all back home.

(c) The third great insight of the prophets grows out of the first two. It encompasses the issue of *loyalty*. We could put it as a reasoned conclusion: if God is really among us acting in sovereign power and if God's purposes are loving, then to whom else or to what else would we even think of giving our loyalty? I suspect, however, that the prophets' insight here was born more of the direct experience of God's ultimacy and love than of logic. But it shaped both their own loyalty and their messages, which often called the people away from disloyalty and misplaced trust.

(2) A second kind of vision which grew out of encounter with God is *discernment*. It is the capacity to see things for what they are rather than for what they purport to be. It is the ability to see through deception and self-delusion and to call things by name. For example, Isaiah warns, "Woe, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" (Isaiah 5:20) Amos shocked the leaders of Samaria by telling them that the "treasures" in their secure mansions would better be called "violence" and "oppression" (Amos 3:10). What they thought was God's blessing for their good behavior Amos saw as wealth gained by ripping off the poor. With discernment, the prophets were able to see through ideology and dogma, through rationalizations and justifications, through religious and political pandering, and the many other ways humans can fool themselves and each other. They spoke out of that discernment to open new ways for people to understand their circumstances and their lives. They offered people the possibility of living in the freedom of truth rather than in the certain destruction of delusion.

(3) The third kind of vision we can call "*prophetic imagination*." This is the capacity to see what is yet possible under the power of God rather than

yielding to cynicism and despair or to a status quo which is death warmed over. It is the capacity to know deeply that seeing the possibility of reconciliation and of restoration is not merely lofty idealism or wishful thinking. Brueggemann writes: "It is the task of prophetic imagination and ministry to bring people to engage the promise of newness that is at work in our history with God" (*The Prophetic Imagination*, 62-3). It is Jeremiah buying a field while he is in prison and the Babylonians are conquering his homeland, including the field. Someday people will once again buy fields and plant and harvest in this land, he says (Jeremiah 32). It is Isaiah declaring that there would be a wide highway through the desert on which God would once again lead the Israelites safely to freedom (Isaiah 40). It is to hold out the real possibility that the future of our lives in the real world need not be bound by the patterns and failures of the past, but that it can be creatively ordered and empowered by the sovereign God who is with us in love.

Conversion

Encounter and vision lead to a third movement in prophetic experience, which is *conversion*. This is conversion in the sense of on-going and deepening personal transformation. This movement is as extensive and thorough-going as encounter and vision, but I'll treat only two aspects of conversion briefly here.

The first is that the prophet struggles toward a re-rooting of personal identity. The innate demands of loyalty to God above all else creates a new allegiance, a new orientation. And this is often awkward. The prophets knew the clumsy tension between living in a particular time and place but, at the same time, transcending that time and place. As they placed themselves as citizens under the reality of God's rule, they became bi-cultural or cross-cultural persons with the sort of vague in-betweenness that can bring. Their sense of the source of their lives and the object of their loyalty had radically changed, and this altered the personal, familial, and national identities they had previously held.

A second aspect of the prophets' conversion was a personal transformation which moved them toward congruence with reality as they had seen it, toward conformity to God's purposes in the world as they knew them to be. Our Old Testament examples of this in the prophets are limited, but the reasons for this movement are clear. One is that integrity and love require it. It is impossible to sustain intimacy with God and, at the same time, avoid being molded to God's character. Conversion is a natural movement driven by the encounter with God which deepens and clarifies the prophets' vision.

Further, one test of true prophets is whether their lives correspond to the messages they give. Jesus, for example, made that point when he said you can tell the nature of a tree by its fruit (Matthew 12:33-37). This is a practical matter, not just a matter of duty. Anyone who has experience with

prophecy knows that one of the first assaults on a prophet, particularly on one who says uncomfortable things, is the charge of hypocrisy. "So what about you, old Goody Two Shoes?! You're not so wonderful yourself." And so on, in the hopes of dismissing the message by discrediting the messenger.

This is a charge that has bite, by the way, because a real prophet knows that, in some measure, such charges are true. Prophets, too, are drawn down by sin, or, at the very least, live in some measure as accomplices and beneficiaries of their culture's corruption. They feel keenly Isaiah's confession of complicity, "I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips." (Isaiah 6:5) For some, no doubt, this is an embarrassment which hinders them in telling the truth that they know. For many others it is reason to continue humbly in the process of conversion, relying on God to help bring their lives in conformity to their best vision.

Witness

The last movement of prophetic experience is also the best known, because the bulk of the prophetic material in the Bible flows from it. This movement is *witness*. Here the prophets communicate to others what they know of God's presence and purpose. Sometimes the process of conversion itself foreshadows witness, for a notable change in lifestyle or an act done simply out of personal integrity may, even unwittingly, deliver a powerful message. I think, for example, of John Woolman when as a young man he first declined to write a bill of sale for a slave. It was an action taken only out of conscience, but it could not go unnoticed.

But the witness of the prophets is not usually unwitting. They had to tell what they knew for the love of God and the love of their peers. Their witness was powerful. It was creative and filled with variety. They used all sorts of speech forms, many of them poetic. (The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar writes that "what a prophet has to say can never be said in prose" [quoted in Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 4].) They used courtroom language, dirges, satires, thanksgiving songs, doxologies, proverbs, woe oracles, parables, and many other speech forms. They also used acted or life symbols to convey their messages. They performed mime and street theater, dressed (or undressed) in unusual ways, gave their kids weird symbolic names, sang protest songs, challenged false prophets to public contests, adopted habits or lifestyles that would grab people's attention, buried underwear, smashed clay pots, bought worthless real estate, and much more.

At least two things impress me about the prophets' witness. The first is the energy and creativity that the witness displays. These are not forms of witness that they borrowed from the latest edition of the *Prophet's Handbook*. They grow dynamically out of encounter and out of an ongoing life with the

Creator and Source of energy. Deeply grounded prophetic witness is not merely imitative.

In their witness, the prophets also impress me by the risks they took and the courage their witness required. Of course, they could get killed, which has its down side. Or they could be hunted by the military or thrown in jail. Or slandered, laughed at, and ostracized. Or they might have to live with the embarrassment of certainty, when they had to persist in speaking the word of God they knew for sure to those who thought they just made it up and hadn't even a wild chance of being right. Or there was the awkwardness of publicly taking on the reigning ideologies and deeply cherished idolatries. Such faithfulness required risk and courage.

Yet it is a witness that must be made, for it is the natural culmination that flows from the reality of God encountered. It is a way of signaling and embodying the reality that God is among us in power and love to restore life, individually and corporately, to its highest possibilities.

Questions to Explore

Let me offer only three brief suggestions about how this exploration of prophetic spirituality might meet our own communities of faith. First, as I have suggested that, in some measure, every Christian is called to prophetic life and witness, let me also suggest that the pattern I have outlined may serve as a way of thinking about our spiritual formation. Encounter, vision, conversion, and witness. I see a lot of examples of this movement in persons whose names you would recognize and in many whom you wouldn't know. What puzzles me, however, is how often this progression gets short-circuited. Do people brush up against encounter and pull back? Is authentic vision co-opted by ideology, rationalization, or the cherished idolatries of our culture? Is real conversion too threatening? Is witness too much of a risk? I have ideas, but I'm not sure about what stunts this process of spiritual growth.

Secondly, let me wonder whether we might be willing to be communities of vision. Can we be discerning enough to see through delusion or nonsense and call it by name, whether it be in the church, the college, the professional academy, the marketplace, or the other cultures and subcultures in which we live? Can we have the prophetic imagination to envision the new things that God might do in the world if we would live with courage and obedience?

Finally, I wonder whether we might even more intentionally be alternative communities of vision. In particular, can we be the kind of communities that enable and support the transformation, the conversion, the personal re-rooting, and the witness that authentic encounter with God will bring? I wonder whether we might even more intentionally become communities of

prophets, signaling and embodying God's active presence and loving purpose in the world.

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