

Mission as Prophecy

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[0 : 00] All right. If you are willing, would you pray with me?

Creator God, Lord and giver of life, source, one who creates space for our flourishing, gives us hope in our hearts, curates our wildest dreams, I pray that you would help us this morning to find rest for our souls.

Regardless of whatever has been going on this past week, whatever we might be going into this next week, I pray that we would find rest for our souls, rest in our bodies, experience the good news that you are here and that you are constantly sending yourself forth into our lives and into our communities for good, deep and abiding good.

Thank you for this gathering of folks in this moment. May we hear your word and know you more and live more into your love and goodness.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. So from January to April of my junior year in college, I lived in Maximo Jerez, which is a neighborhood in Managua, Nicaragua.

[1 : 55] It was the first time I had been out of the country. If you don't count when my parents and I crossed the border into Canada, which was quite an adventure for us.

I remember driving from the airport that day, arriving in Managua at 21. I remember still just how it felt, the bustle of the streets and the narrow alleys and the roundabouts and the overcrowded buses, all of those things.

Is there anything I need to do? Okay. Okay. Just checking. Yeah. I just remember how different all that felt from, oh God.

Just in case. Okay. Okay. Okay. Just tell me what to do. Yeah. I just remember how different all that felt from growing up in the town that I grew up in, in the South.

And I was so excited to be there. As somebody who was deeply interested in, what should I do? I would like to play this off, but I'm not sure how.

[3 : 12] Should I turn it off?

Should I get down? Okay. Okay. All right. My wife is a lawyer, so I know that lawsuits are possible. Seriously.

DC, all right? There's a lot of lawyers in this room. So anyway, I was really excited to be in Managua at 21. I was somebody who was really interested in revolutionary movements around the world.

And I was taking part in the study abroad experience specifically focused on the Sandinista and Cuban revolutions. And one of the things that I really wanted to do was this capstone project at the end of my time focused on the work of the poet, Father Ernesto Cardinal, his role in the Sandinista revolution.

But once I had met him, this white-haired man in a beret that just had this regal presence, I basically chickened out because I was so intimidated by him, by the idea of spending a ton of hours in his presence.

[4 : 35] Yet despite that, all of that, despite my admiration for him, I remember that his name wasn't the name that was spoken of the most as I studied that spring.

As I studied with people in the community and leaders and activists, the name that kept coming up over and over again was that of Daniel Ortega. Ortega had been this instrumental leader in the Sandinista revolution and this key figure in the post-revolution government advocating for policies of land reform and wealth redistribution.

And eventually he won the presidential election in 1984. Since those months, though, of living in Managua, I confess that I've still been more interested in the work of Ernesto Cardinal than I have of the life of Daniel Ortega.

Yet a couple of years ago, I couldn't help but bring my attention back to Ortega because I began to see in the news that what had happened to him was very similar to what happens all too often to revolutionaries.

He had become a dictator. He had become a dictator. He had become a dictator. Upon returning to presidential power, he started to crack down on protesters with folks being killed.

[6 : 04] He refused to leave office, like kind of all the classic moves of folks who are moving toward dictatorship, human rights abuses, et cetera. And I know that when I tell that story, you know, if you are thinking about revolutions around the world, you might also realize how familiar that is, how it happens over and over and over again.

It's the story of the revolutionary on a mission. It's the story of how over and over so many of those who see themselves on a mission have failed to grasp, as one novelist puts it really well, they fail to grasp whose imagination they are living inside.

Now, if you've been around for a few Sundays, you might know that we are moving through this sermon series aimed at asking what it means to be in mission. We're using the book of Deuteronomy both as a window into wisdom as well as a mirror into the truth that we can so easily get this wrong.

If we are people who claim to have received the good news of the resurrection of Jesus, what do we do with the good news? Particularly when so much talk and practice around Christian missions has edged toward or advocated outright possession, how are we to follow a God who is missionary by nature?

Always sending out love and freedom and healing and reconciliation into the world. Always sending herself into the world.

[8 : 05] Pastor Anthony set up this series by giving a bit of background on the book of Deuteronomy. It's an admittedly complex book for a bunch of different reasons.

And then the following Sunday, Matt and I preached about the Ten Commandments and how life-affirming community values are essential if we are to practice mission in a healthy way. And then last week, Tochi and Becky preached on the idea of witnessing and how those might be reframed from some of the problematic ways of seeing them that we might be used to.

Specifically, Becky talked about a little bit about how the doctrine of incarnation has to be central to any healthy mission. We have to be lovers of human culture and human creativity and human beings in order to practice mission well.

I would argue that we actually need to be in awe of those things. To have a kind of riotous admiration. To come out of disdain.

Committing to go down deep into human culture and into human creativity and with human beings in the most respectful ways, dialogical ways, as Jesus did.

[9 : 34] And I know that's hard. I'm going to be honest. I, the, what was it, Tuesday? Tuesday, Tuesdays, Pastor Andy and I have our weekly meeting.

And around noon this week during our weekly meeting, we walked to Whole Foods together, which is near my house. And I went up to the hot bar immediately.

And there was this sign on the hot bar that asked people to refrain from nibbling directly from the bar. But rather to ask a store worker, a store manager, for a sample.

And I said to Pastor Ethity, this is why I believe in the fall. I mean, there is this, like, who nibbles from a public bar? If that's you, there is grace and mercy available.

But we do need to talk about that, okay? Like, a public hot bar. And really, my genuine instinct was saying, people are so crazy.

[10 : 38] And, yes, and to be in mission, that's just a tidy, silly example.

But we've got to come out of this disdain for human beings and all their messiness and all their nibbling from hot bars. We can disdain our fellow human beings.

We can disdain other cultures, other perspectives. But to be in mission, we have to come out of that and seek deliverance into incarnational love. Today, I'm going to shift our focus a little bit.

We, like the children of Israel, we've been given promises by God. We, like them, have been given a mission. And we, like them, have to contemplate the nature and role of power.

If we are not to edge toward exploitation and possession. To be clear, we are not them. But we can find resonance in the stories that they tell.

[11 : 44] So, the middle section of Deuteronomy sees four positions of authority critical to the functioning of the Israelite community. The law official, the king, the priest, and the prophet.

And today, I want to focus on the roles of the king and the priest. Because I think that they are crucial in teaching us something about what it means to practice mission.

So, we're looking at Deuteronomy 17, 14 through 20. We're going to read that section and then I'm going to skip ahead to the description of the prophet in a minute.

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you. And you have taken possession of it and settled in it. And you say, I will set a king over me.

Like all the nations that are around me. You may indeed set over you a king whom the Lord your God will choose. One of your own community you may set as a king over you.

[12 : 46] You are not permitted to put a foreigner over you who is not of your own community. Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself. Or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses.

Since the Lord has said to you, you must never return that way again. And he must not acquire many wives for himself or else his heart will turn away.

Also, silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself. When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of the law written for him in the presence of the Levitical priests.

It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life. So that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes.

Neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment. Either to the right or to the left. So that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel.

[13 : 47] Now, while this passage might at first seem like a little bit far removed from the reality of the world that we live in, I think that it actually speaks to us something that is quite near to our experience.

The reality that for the efficiency of human community, we often set up a person or a few people to run things. There is not anything new about this.

And it was certainly not new in this part of the world where kings were often considered to rule by divine right. Or to be considered gods themselves. What is remarkable is that in the Israelite community, kingship, at least according to this particular passage, was permitted but without enthusiasm.

It's like a concession. The role of the king was to be extremely limited compared to neighboring nations. The king was not to be considered supernatural. He was to be one from among your own community.

So disallowing any claim to being supernatural. He was not a supreme or even last judge when it came to law. Other people, law officials and judges, were given that task.

[15 : 10] And he was not to accumulate. Not by trading horses. Not by marrying many women for political advantage. And not by creating large amounts of revenue that would benefit him.

It's clear that writers have here in view the king Solomon. He was indicted for all of these exact reasons. For accumulating in these exact ways.

And basically damaging his own kingdom. He concentrated wealth through state management as opposed to local management. He used forced labor. And there's just a number of other problems.

And if you study it, his story, it's fascinating how we can often look at our own folks in power in our own spaces. Who managed to do some very similar things.

Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann, in a seminal book. If you have not read this book, I highly recommend it. It's called *The Prophetic Imagination*. I'm going to quote from it a few different times. He sees in Solomon what he calls the royal consciousness.

[16 : 18] This is a key way to think about this. He explains that the royal consciousness is committed to achievable satiation. Just enough of the population is kept full and satisfied to quench any tide toward unrest.

In reflecting on how this reality might be present in our own time, here's what he says. The royal consciousness with its program of achievable satiation has redefined our notions of humanness.

And it has done that to all of us. It has created a subjective consciousness concerned only with self-satisfaction.

It has denied the legitimacy of tradition that requires us to remember. Of authority that expects us to answer. And of community that calls us to care.

It has so enthroned the present, the eternal now, that a promised future, delayed but certain, is unthinkable.

[17 : 26] Instead of this royal consciousness rooted in acquisition, the passage is clear that kings are to be people of humility.

Intentionally cultivating this particular attitude of heart. Those set up in power are not to exalt themselves above. It's interesting that the passage uses a ton of language of above and below.

They're to meditate on Torah, the instruction to the community. And then this, as I was studying this, there was one phrase that kept popping out at me.

And it's this one. When referring to the possibility of trading with Egypt, the text says, you must never return that way again. You must never, ever return that way again.

Never go back to believing that the gods are in your control and for your advantage narrowly. Never go back to a focus on scarcity that leads to this need to excessively accumulate.

[18 : 33] Never go back to a sense of hierarchy, to the implementation of hierarchy rooted in control, the desire for control. And never go back to a religion that legitimizes coercive power and insists that things can be ordered no other way than they currently are.

The point, the point here is that the king is called to imagine and live out a genuine newness. Outside of the boundaries of the world of Pharaoh and Solomon and of all those who come after them.

But we know that this imagination is not often the case. This cultivated imagination, this living out of this imagination is not usually the case.

And that's why this community also saw the need for this other authoritative position that I want to now highlight, that they highlight a little bit, like a couple of verses later in Deuteronomy, the prophet.

So here's what that says. This is Deuteronomy 18 to 15 through 22. And if you're interested in this, this is like kind of the first place where the role of the prophet is like, really like, you know, understood in the Hebrew, at least if you read chronologically in the Hebrew Bible.

[19 : 58] The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet. Like me, from among your own people, you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, if I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more or ever again see this fire, I will die.

Then the Lord replied to me, they are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people.

I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who is not he the words of that prophet shall speak in my name. I myself will hold accountable.

But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods and who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak, that prophet shall die.

All right, I'm going to stop there. Because kings so often fail to imagine and live out a genuinely new alternative to Solomon and Pharaoh, the children of Israel recognize that prophets were necessary.

[21 : 12] That we must have prophets among us. These folks were understood to emerge from inside networks and sub-communities of other prophets. These people were not actually lone rangers.

And their job was to speak forth. And those are the two words that are really central to the heart of what it means to be a prophet. They could use words. They could use actions.

But they always spoke forth a vision of God's future. And this wasn't mere fortune-telling or future casting in some narrow sense.

It wasn't just a more ancient form of, I don't know if y'all remember this, but those Dionne Warwick commercials that I grew up with that constantly ran. My mother would come into the room and try to snatch me away because we're a good Christian household.

It wasn't that. That wasn't the role of the prophet. It was proclaiming that the world outside of a royal consciousness could and should be.

[22 : 18] It was the lion shall live with the lamb and these dry bones shall live. And the spirit of the Lord is upon me because the world God is making, in that world the poor have good news and the captives are released.

The prophets, they speak forth. And the prophets also always speak out. As the father of Latin American liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez, is noted for saying, prophets always announce the good news, but because of that, they also always have to denounce all that stands against what is good news.

And then this text makes clear that above everything, the prophet had to be like Moses, bringing the words of God and guided by the words of God toward liberation.

Now, as I was preparing this, one thing that came up for me is that I realized that in progressive spaces, the ones that I tend to be in, it's pretty fashionable to talk about the call to speak truth to power.

In progressive Christian spaces, it's really common to emphasize prophecy. And in our own church mission statement, you might have seen this or just know this, we very intentionally have made clear that we are pursuing the way of Jesus and that that way is prophetic.

[23 : 59] Yet, I'm not sure that we really understand that prophecy is a critical way of thinking about mission. In fact, the writers of one of my favorite books on mission, Stephen Bevins and Roger Schroeder, they say this, and I hope this lodges in your mind.

Prophecy might be the single best word to express the reality of mission in today's world. Prophecy might be the single best word to express the reality of mission in today's world.

Speaking and living against the royal consciousness of the status quo is a critical part of mission. And with that realization, it might be easy to kind of pat ourselves on the back.

I feel like probably a good majority of this church has some bent already in that direction, if not already working in that area. But when we consider the role of the prophet, it goes beyond words or actions toward isolated incidents in need of social justice.

The understanding is fuller than that when we talk about prophetic mission. So here's Brueggemann again. The task of the prophetic ministry is to nurture a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.

[25 : 36] This alternative consciousness does two things. It serves to criticize and dismantling the dominant consciousness. I think sometimes we're pretty decent at that.

And it serves to energize persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward the community, toward which the community of faith may move.

This is imagination work. And it's hard to do imagination work as a cynic.

It's hard to take up the mission of energizing people toward hope from a place of cynicism. It's hard to proclaim confidently that things will not always be like this from that kind of place.

And those tasks are all fully inside the role of the prophet. I once heard, when I was driving to work years ago, this interview.

[26 : 40] And it's one of those quotes that I've never forgotten. And I cannot remember who said it. But they were interviewed on NPR. And she said, optimism is as spiritually necessary as it is intellectually suspect.

As a prophetic people called to God's missional, incarnational life, we must be open to optimism. And we have to find hope.

One, if you were here on Easter, you know I came out about how important the resurrection is to me. And one of the reasons among many that the resurrection of Jesus is so important to my theology is because it roots me in the sense that true interruption of things as they are can occur.

We're not doomed to this always watching revolutionaries become dictators. We're not doomed to create and recreate human societies with different configurations, but ultimately with the same royal consciousness.

Genuine newness is possible. The life and death and resurrection of Jesus demonstrate that something else can enter the system.

[27 : 58] Other alternatives are available. And that's good news. We didn't ourselves make these alternatives.

They emerge from the Trinitarian life of God. And yet they have been given to us to freely receive and to freely live out.

For some of us, prophetic mission might look like supporting the encampments that are popping up on universities all across the country. To say that the killing of 34,000 people who are mainly non-combatants, many of them children, is not a justifiable part of war.

And then for others of us, prophetic mission might be more indirect. It might be not placing your body on the front lines, but it might be shifting the dominant consciousness through intentional imagination work.

Or through creating the containers for such imagination work to happen. For all of us, I think it has to look like studying the tradition of Moses and then studying and living into the way of Jesus, the prophet that the New Testament writers over and over say is the new Moses.

[29 : 18] And then particularly studying Jesus' jujitsu on the cross of turning the energy of the opponent of the enemy against them in creative ways.

That's prophetic ways that shift the perspective on what is possible and what we can create. So this is one of those sermons, I do not know how to land the plane.

So I would just say that I think mission is really hard. That's why we're doing this series. Mission can be a really, really hard thing to talk about and process when it's been used in such negative ways.

And yet we do have this God who, you know, I said before is love hitting the cosmic fan. And how can we be honest about that reality?

Will you pray with me? God, we are those who, by our gathering here, that we are at least open to the prophetic way of Jesus.

[30 : 32] Open to the prophetic tradition of the scriptures. I pray, Lord, that you would help us to see that way as a part of mission, as a part of what it means to help bring flourishing and good and wholeness to the world.

Help us to realize our part. And may that, Lord, part bring rest and not burden, hope and joy rather than a sense of weight.

We love you. And may we love you more. Thank you.