

Prophetic Poet, Poetic Prophet
Jeremiah 7: 1-15

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While walking my dog
A poem popped into my head
That can't be I said
I'm not a poet
Write it down a voice said
I can't I said
I don't know how
I'm not a poet

That really happened to me.
While walking my dog late one afternoon, a poem popped into my head.
But I can't remember it.
I didn't write it down.
I'm not a poet.

I wonder, how many people are not poets, even though they were born poets?
How many people don't write down the poems that pop into their heads, because they think they can't, because they're not poets?
It's sad. Think of the poetry the world is missing, the unwritten poems lost and forgotten in people's heads.

On the other hand, some people who think they're poets, really aren't poets.
After all, writing down whatever pops into your head doesn't make you a poet, even if you think you're a poet.

People don't choose to be a poet, people discover they're a poet.
Some resist the discovery. They don't think they're a poet, or don't want to be a poet, or fear being a poet.
Some overcome the resistance. More don't.

Prophets are like poets.
People don't choose to be a prophet, people discover they're a prophet.
Some resist the discovery. They don't think they're a prophet, or don't want to be a prophet, or fear being a prophet.
Some overcome the resistance. More don't.
Think of all the unspoken prophetic words, all the undone prophetic deeds, because people say, I can't, I don't know how.
On the other hand, some people who think they're prophets, really aren't prophets.
Saying or doing whatever pops into your head doesn't make you a prophet, even if you think you're a prophet.

The word of God comes to Jeremiah,
Jeremiah, prophesy.
Jeremiah resists. I can't, I don't know how. I'm not a prophet.
The word of God persists. Jeremiah, you're a born prophet.
Jeremiah resists more. I can't. I don't know what to say.
The word of God persists more. I will show you, I will tell you.

If we accept this brief interaction between Jeremiah and the word of God at face value, and take it too literally, we miss the rich drama of a boy discovering he's a prophet.

And resisting the discovery.

Resisting the prophet's identity, resisting the prophet's vocation
Until finally, Jeremiah's resistance is overcome.

We can read this story—the call of the prophet Jeremiah—in less than 10 seconds.

If taken at face value and read too literally, we can easily think it took Jeremiah less than 10 seconds of his life to discover he was a prophet, overcome his resistance, and accept, yes, I'm a prophet.

But I think that does a huge disservice to the profound, and at times, agonizing drama of the prophet's call, the prophet's identity, the prophet's vocation.

In Jeremiah's case, I think his resistance to being a prophet is always there. Throughout his life, throughout his vocational career as a prophet, Jeremiah resists, and at times, bitterly laments, being born a prophet.

For Jeremiah, it's often painful being a prophet.

When the word of God rubs up against Jeremiah's internal resistance, enough to overcome it, the friction this produces within Jeremiah is quite painful.

And what the word of God tells Jeremiah to say to his contemporaries, and what the word of God tells Jeremiah to do in public, causes a tremendous amount of friction between the prophet and his contemporaries. No wonder he resisted.

We do Jeremiah a huge disservice when we gloss over the intense human drama—internal and external—that comes with being a prophet.

Speaking of poets and prophets, I'm grateful for a person I consider to be a poet and a prophet, Wendell Berry, though I'm not sure if Wendell Berry is a poet who's prophetic, or a prophet who's poetic.

He seems to think of himself as a Christian who farms, or maybe a farmer who's Christian.

At any rate, through his poems, his essays, and the way he lives as a farmer deeply in love with the land he inhabits, and deeply grateful to God, to whom all land belongs, Wendell Berry is a prophetic presence in this world.

Here's a taste of his prophetic poetry, or poetic prophesy.

His Sabbath poem # 12 from 2008 has as a prelude a passage from the prophet Hosea:
My people are destroyed by lack of knowledge.

We forget the land we stand on
and live from. We set ourselves
free in an economy founded
on nothing, on greed verified
by fantasy, on which we entirely
depend. We depend on fire
that consumes the world without
lighting it. To this dark blaze
driving the inert metal
of our most high desire
we offer our land as fuel,
thus offering ourselves at last
to be burned. This is our riddle
to which the answer is a life
that none of us has lived.

Wendell Berry ends his essay, "The Gift of Good Land," with these prophetic words,
words replete with Christian symbolism:

To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this
knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly,
greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration, we condemn
ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.

Wow. Put those words on your refrigerator. Put them on your doorposts, to you remind
yourself when you enter and when you leave. Teach them to your children every day.

To live, we must break the body and shed the blood of creation.

The body, the blood, of God's creation.

The body, the blood, that belongs to God.

The body, the blood—life. God's life.

Are we breaking the bodies and shedding the blood, the life that belongs to God,
knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently? Are we living sacramentally?

Or are we breaking the bodies and shedding the blood, killing God's life, greedily,
clumsily, destructively? Are we desecrating God's creation?

Prophetic words to ponder.

Especially before going to the grocery store, or eating your next meal.

Do I know if the food I'm putting in my shopping cart, and on my plate, is sacramental or
a desecration?

Did those who broke it from the earth, or killed it, do so knowing the land, the water, the
air, the plants, the animals, the fish, all belong to God, and did they break it, or kill it, in a loving
fashion, skillfully, reverently?

Or did the production of the food in my shopping cart, on my plate, desecrate God's
creation by poisoning land, water and air, by causing animals to suffer needlessly, by exploiting
poorer, more vulnerable human beings?

Wow. Tough questions that hit close to home.

In fact, right on the dinner table.

In fact, right into our very own bodies.

Is what we're putting into our very own bodies to live sacramental or a desecration?

Tough prophetic questions to ask ourselves.

Questions I hope we'll ask ourselves when we reflect on Jim Antal's book on climate change and the church. Food production, and food consumption, have a direct impact on climate change.

Maybe we can start a group called sacramental eating, or sacramental living—practical things we can do in our lives, making changes in our lives that are in our power to make—in order to live a more sacramental life.

We're not all called to be poets, and we're not all called to be prophets.

However, I think we all have a poetic side, and we all have a prophetic side.

Some of us resist those sides. I'm not poetic, I'm not prophetic.

But the more we overcome the resistance, the more poetic and prophetic we'll be.

And our prophetic poets, our poetic prophets, will guide us knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, and reverently to live lives on this earth that are more sacramental.

And no more will the people perish for lack of knowledge.