

The Story Series
Week 15: The Prophets
God's Messengers

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It has been a pleasure for me to act as your tour guide in this *Story* journey that we embarked upon 14 weeks ago. We are making our way through the Old Testament, meeting Bible characters, and learning some truths that still speak into our lives this very day. As your tour guide, I feel obligated to warn you that we have reached a pretty depressing period in the Old Testament. This day on our tour ain't gonna be pretty! Just for the record, you've been warned!

(cell phone rings) Ah, man... I forgot to silence my cell phone. Please excuse me. "Hello? I'm kind of busy right now. Can you call you back later?... Yeah, you could say I'm kind of in the middle of something.... What?... They did what?... You want me to go where?... And say what?..."

A phone call from God. That's the next unfolding plot in this *Story* about God's people. God is trying to get a hold of Israel. The question is, "Will they pick up, or will they send God to voice mail?" And if they do pick up, will they listen? And if they listen, will they actual do what God tells them to do?

Today we enter the prophetic books of the Old Testament, the writings of the prophets – people like Elijah and Elisha, Amos and Hosea. A prophet isn't some kind of fortune teller, revealing things that will happen in the future. No, a prophet is a person called by God to deliver a message in the present moment. Prophets are God's spokespeople – people who speak on behalf of God. As I stand before you today and share God's Word with you, I am taking on the role of a prophet – someone who speaks God's truth into the lives of God's people.

Prophets were not very likable people because the message they brought on behalf of God was usually one of repentance and judgment. In other words, prophets pointed out what you were doing wrong in the eyes of God, and how your rebellion must be stopped or God would put an end to it.

So why is God sending these prophets to the nation of Israel to announce such gloom and doom? If you remember back – way back to Abraham – God promised that he was going to build a great nation. God declared that he would bless all nations through the offspring of Abraham and Sarah. And God did just that. God blesses Abraham's family and he makes them BIG and he makes them strong.

All the other surrounding nations look at Israel, now nestled in the Promise Land, and start to wonder, “Why are they so blessed?” What the other nations come to realize is that Israel is so blessed because of their relationship with the one, true God, Yahweh.

The one, true God of heaven and earth loves them, cares for them, protects them, and guides them to lead a distinctively different kind of lifestyle than the people of other nations. They are to love only the one, true God, with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. And they are to love each other in the same manner. The secret of Israel’s great success and prosperity is found in their God, and it caused all the others nations to say to themselves, “Hmm, we want to get to know this God, too.”

This was God’s game plan all along. The faithful nation of Israel would lead all of the other nations into a relationship with God Almighty. Out of this same nation of Israel, God promised that One would be born – One would come and provide the ultimate, final solution for everyone to come back into a right relationship with God.

So all eyes were on Israel. The stakes were high. It was essential that Israel reveal the true nature and will of God to all the other nations. But as we journey through *The Story* we have come to recognize that Israel has stopped being a faithful witness for God. They are no longer fully devoted to God. They have become complacent in their devotion and worship of God. They began to revere the gods of the culture. They disregard the 10 Commandments. Murder and theft become common. Israel now looks like every other nation. They have lost their distinction. They are no longer revealing the true nature and character of God.

If God would have continued to bless Israel, it would have sent the wrong message to all of the other nations of who God really is. Take for instance, if I went out on the town one night, robbed a bank, was arrested and my mug shot appeared in the newspaper. Then the next Sunday I stood before you and preached as if I did nothing wrong. That would send the wrong message, don’t you think? (*Especially with some FBI guys in the room!*) My actions would send the wrong message to the Trinity Lutheran family and to the Sherman and Denison and surrounding communities of the values God expects of his people, especially from the leaders of his church. I would not be revealing to you or to the community the true nature and character of God.

Such an incident would be grounds for me to be removed from my position. In the same way, because of Israel’s blatant sinfulness, God decides to remove their leader whose name is Solomon. God even goes so far as to divide the kingdom into new separate nations – Israel in the north, Judah in the south – making it less strong and no longer unified. It would no longer draw the attention of other nations. It’s a dark time in Israel’s history.

God’s plan to save the world is starting to take shape. We begin to see that God will not use all 12 tribes of Israel in order to accomplish his will of sending the Messiah. In fact, if we remember back to the story of David, God tells King David that the Messiah will come from his family, from his tribe, which is the tribe of Judah. Hopefully you also remember from

last week that when the nation of Israel divides, 10 tribes establish the northern kingdom, and only two tribes settle in the southern kingdom – the tribe of Judah (there it is again) and the tribe of Benjamin.

Do you sense what God is doing? God is whittling away those people who, by their thoughts, words, and deeds, are no longer assets in God's game plan to bring forth the Savior of the world. God's plan is moving ever closer to its culmination. The people of the 10 tribes in the north still have an opportunity to be used by God. They have not been abandoned by God. God still loves them. They will not play a role in bringing forth the Savior of the world, true, but God does not abandon them.

God gives them a second chance. In fact, God gives them 208 years to change their ways and to start living again according to God's life-giving ways. That seems reasonable: 208 years! What this demonstrates is that God is a patient God. God is a long-suffering God. God does not give up on us.

These second chances from God come in the form of prophets, the spokespeople we talked about earlier. The job description of these prophets was to closely listen to God and then to deliver God's message to people who had lost their way. The people were no longer listening for the voice of God themselves, and so God – out of love – uses these prophets to get the people's attention once again, in hopes that they will see that their life choices will only lead to heartache and death.

The prophets, sensing how truly lost the people had become, would literally shout out the message that God had given to them. There would be no chance of not hearing or ignoring God's message if it was boisterously shouted out at the top of their lungs.

I envision God giving them a divine megaphone in order that people from far away could still hear the call to repentance and the message of forgiveness and salvation.

The experiences of these prophets are quite remarkable. The prophet Elijah comes up against the evil King Ahab and his wicked wife Queen Jezebel, the ancient Cruella de Vil. He challenges them to a contest to see whose God is the true God. And so the pagan God Baal and Yahweh are both summoned to send fire down from heaven. And guess what? Yahweh, the God of the Holy Bible, wins again. With such a show of true power from Yahweh, you would think that the people would change their ways and start worshipping once again the one, true God. But that didn't happen. The people refused to change their ways. They were as stubborn and set in their ways as we are! So God continues to send more prophets. God refuses to give up on his people! He sends Elisha, Amos, Hosea – 12 prophets in all are sent to the Northern kingdom.

When it comes to this part of *The Story*, the application for our lives is very obvious, I believe. God is speaking to us. God is still speaking to us today through his holy Word. “Can you hear me now?” God asks. Yes, God is speaking to us. The question becomes, “Are we listening?”

When we receive that phone call from God, do we choose to answer it and take the call, or do we choose to ignore it and let God go to voice mail?

We all know how wonderful Caller ID is. But, if by chance, one day your phone rang and the Caller ID said, “God Almighty” would you dare pick it up to hear what God has to say, or would you freak out and start to think of all the things God might want to have a little chat about, and so you just let God go to voicemail?

When Luther told us that we are to “fear God” I don’t think he had “freaking out” in mind! What does it say about us that in so many ways we attempt to hide from God in order not to have to deal with our sinfulness? That’s exactly what Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. When they disobeyed God’s commands, Adam and Eve attempted to hide from God, making them believe that if they didn’t have to face God, then nothing would ever come of their disobedience. That’s what Adam and Eve thought, it’s what the Israelites thought, and sadly, it’s still what we think today.

God is speaking to us through the Bible. The Bible is the No. 1 bestseller of all time. With all of those Bibles lying around, you would think that we would be hearing God’s voice all the time! But that’s the problem. All of those Bibles that we purchase are just lying around.

I was doing a pastoral visit one time and this person told me how proud she was of her family Bible – so proud that she just had to show it to me. When I saw that Bible, I agreed: it was one of the most beautiful Bibles I had ever seen. Genuine leather cover, gold edging on the outside of the pages, large readable print, cut-out tabs for each book, lots of space in the margins for personal notes. It was a gorgeous Bible.

But what I really noticed about that Bible is the sound that it made when I opened it. As I held that Bible in my hands and flipped through its pages, there was this distinct crackling noise, as if I had broke open the spine of that Bible for the very first time. It was the most beautiful Bible that was never being used.

Luther was right when he said that the Bible sitting on your coffee table is not the Word of God. In order for the Bible to become the Word of God, that Bible has to be opened and read, meditated upon and digested. God’s Word is a *living* Word, not a book sitting on our coffee table. The words of the Bible have to make it into our mind and heart in order for it to become God’s Word for us. Or stated differently, in order to actually hear God speak to us, we actually have to read the Bible. That sounds so obvious, but we all too often forget this truth.

If we want to hear God speak into our lives, we have to regularly set aside time for Bible reading and devotional time. At times in our lives when we wrestle with what God wants us to do, we often go to a pastor or to a good Christian friend and get their opinion. That can be helpful, but shouldn't we go first to God's Word? For it is through the Holy Scriptures that God speaks most clearly and most passionately into our lives.

We need to be very intentional about truly listening for the voice of God in our daily lives. God has given us his Word. It's a gift. The words of Scripture are the megaphone that God uses to speak into our lives.

Will we heed God's voice? Will we align our lives to his will and ways and receive the blessings that come from such faithfulness? Or will we just let God go to voicemail, and maybe think about calling God back later?

The Bible assures us that God's Holy Spirit is at work in our lives. The Holy Spirit acts as a kind of amplification system to ensure that we are hearing God speak loud and clear. The Holy Spirit illumines the Word of God for us so that we can ultimately say, "Ah, so that's what God means." The Holy Spirit also calls us to speak the truth of God's Word through our words and deeds – to be modern day Elijah's and Hosea's – so that others may come to know the saving message of Jesus Christ.

So what is God saying to you this day? Maybe God is calling you to *do* something; maybe God is calling you to *stop* doing something. Maybe God is telling you to *go* somewhere, or to *stay away* from somewhere. Maybe God is asking you to *start* something new, to *join* something; or maybe God is telling you to *give up* something. If we aren't listening for the voice of God, then how will we know what God is asking of us?

(phone rings again) Hello? Hey... I see...

(to congregation)

It's God.... this time it's for you...

What do I tell 'em?...

You gonna take the call?