

Prophets Among Us! **Ezekiel 2:1-5**

Fortunetellers vs Prophets

When I was a college student in Korea, I often rode the bus to school and [ppt] there were many seat back advertisements. One of them was a hotline to shamans or fortune-tellers. But what caught my eye was the phrase written in red letters below the numbers: "Believers welcome, confidentiality guaranteed." What did it mean? It meant they welcomed Christians. In other words, many Christians were visiting fortune-tellers. What about these days? It seems like not much has changed. I read an interview article where one shaman mentioned that one of the most frequently asked questions was, "Is it okay to visit you even though I am a Christian?" This means many Christians are still visiting fortune-tellers or shamans to alleviate their anxiety about the future. We all have anxiety about the future, and the desire to overcome that anxiety is strong, so we tend to listen to those who claim to know the future. This shamanistic tendency affects Korean Christianity, leading to a common misunderstanding that the term "prophecy" means the ability to foresee personal future events or fortunes. What about Christianity in the U.S.? I don't see a big difference. [ppt] Do you know this man? He is Nostradamus. He is a very famous guy for his prophecies. People have credited him with predicting pivotal events in history such as the rise of Adolf Hitler to the 9.11 terrorist attacks and even the Covid pandemic. In this cultural understanding, prophesy often means predicting the future. Many conservative Christians try to understand prophetic literature in the Bible in this way. They tend to read the book of Revelation and some part of Daniel only as a prediction of a grim future. While prophetic books do include predictions about the future, foreseeing the future is not the core of biblical prophecy. In the Bible, "prophecy" means delivering the message entrusted by God rather than simply predicting future events. Therefore, when reading the prophetic books, instead of focusing on "what will happen in the future" like reading Nostradamus' prophecies, we should focus on what message God is delivering to the community of faith through the prophet and what it means for us today.

Some People hold on to false hope

Ezekiel lived during a tumultuous period in Israel's history. [ppt] The Babylonian empire invaded and conquered Jerusalem in 597 BCE. While establishing a new king to rule in Jerusalem, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, carried away the king of Judah, royal families, priests, social elites and ten thousand captives to Babylon. Ezekiel was among the exiles taken to Babylon. [ppt] Those captives were relocated to an area called, Tel-abib, by the River Chebar. Tel-abib means "the land laid waste by a flood." (3:15) and we can easily assume that people had to struggle for survival. In addition, they had to struggle with the sense of loss, humiliation, anxiety and uncertainty for the future. In this time of agony, God called Ezekiel to prophesize to the exilic community of Israelites in Babylon.

If you were one of the exiles, what message would you want to hear from a prophet? I am pretty sure that people wanted to hear a message of consolation and hope. Some people actually held onto hope that the Lord would not allow a pagan nation to take the holy city, Jerusalem and abandon God's chosen people and therefore, they believed they would soon return to their home. While God repeatedly said through prophets, "Jerusalem will surely fall," the people clung to false hope and might have simply dreamt of rebuilding their homes, tasting the sweet wine of their vineyards, and returning to the old lives they enjoyed. God refers to the Israelites as a

rebellious, obstinate and stubborn people. Even after the nation fell and they lived in exile, they did not change their hearts and ways of life. They continued to hold on to vain hopes that Jerusalem would last forever and that they would restore their old glory.

Many scholars refer to this era as "Post-Christendom," meaning the age of Christianity's prominence has ended. It means that Christianity, once central to society, has now been pushed to the margins. During this time, many Christians also feel fear and anxiety as if we are in exile. Some Christians do not want to let go of their old glory and try to reclaim their privileges by any means. This November, the United States will have a presidential election. Incumbent Democratic President Joe Biden will face off against former Republican President Donald Trump, who is aiming for a comeback after losing the last election. As we all know, the Christian conservative faction in America has formed a significant support base for Trump. Who are these Christians? They are predominantly the conservative white evangelicals feeling anxious about the declining influence of whites in America and the ability of Christianity to uphold American values. They deeply desire the church to regain its former glory. Seeing the church pushed to the periphery, these conservative white Christians seek to reclaim the privileges and power Christianity once enjoyed by aligning politically. Many of them are drawn to Christian nationalism. They argue that since America was founded on Christian principles, it must return to those roots. It sounds appealing, but Christian nationalism is a misguided political ideology. According to General Board of Church and Society of the UMC, it "distorts both the Christian faith and the United States Constitution often providing cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation."¹ While using Christian language and imagery, Christian nationalism advocates for white dominance, representing the far-right conservative political ideology. However, seeking for or fighting for old privileges at the expense of others is not a way we should move forward. What must fall must fall. It must fall so it can be rebuilt by God.

We don't need to lament about Christianity's loss of privileged position or superiority in our society. God doesn't care whether Christianity becomes the majority religion in the world or not because God is bigger than Christianity. Right? What we really need to lament is church becoming a dead sect. In *Thoughts Upon Methodism*, John Wesley wrote, "I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power." Having the form of religion without power... this phrase struck me. Church and we, Christians are certainly in exile... exile from the kin-dom of God where God's reign is fulfilled and God's rule of love, justice and mercy prevails. Rampant gun violence, the destructive power of racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty, war... those evil forces stimulate fear, anxiety, mistrust and hatred toward others. We are in exile from God's kin-dom. Even worse, we feel that there is nothing we can do about it. However, when we accept that we cannot do anything to transform the world, we end up with spiritual apathy and lethargy.

O mortal, stand up on your feet!

After the Gaspee Day parade this year, I had a pleasant lunch with our Asbury family. There were wonderful foods and lots of laughter. But I was also surprised that people discussed very serious theological questions during a cook out! By knowing that I am a member of the Korean Peace Committee, Deb Rose asked me, "pastor, do you really think reconciliation between North and South Korea is possible?" I answered 'Yes. I BELIEVE it's possible because it's God's will.' Looking at reality alone, it seems impossible. After almost 80 years, the

¹ <https://www.umejustice.org/latest/christian-nationalism-in-the-u-s-1933>

possibility of unification seems very low. That's why faith is necessary. We can't do it by our own strength, but when we believe it will surely be achieved because it is God's will, we can take a step forward to transform a reality that seems impossible to change. It's not just about the issue of the division between North and South Korea. How many unjust realities surround us that seem impossible to change? Issues like racial discrimination, gun violence, war, poverty, and hunger. Believing that what we cannot do, God will do, we can obey God's words and do what we can do. You might think, "Will people ever listen if we speak? What difference does my action really make?" You're right. People often don't listen. They don't care. But regardless of whether people listen or not, we are called to deliver God's words and act according to God's will.

God called Ezekiel, who was weighed down by a dire situation. God said, "O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you." When God spoke to him, a Spirit entered into him and set him on his feet. God empowered Ezekiel to deliver God's message to the people. However, God also warned him that people would not listen. Despite this, the Lord commanded Ezekiel to deliver God's message so that "they shall know that there has been a prophet among them." That's what a prophet is called to do.

Our words may not bring immediate change to the situation or change people's hearts. People may not listen. But they shall know that there has been a prophet among them. Sometimes, the existence of those who speak the truth itself holds meaning. Even though immediate change may not happen right before our eyes, there are moments when those who obey God's words become beacons of hope. We call them prophets, and God calls us to be prophets. The presence of a prophet is a sign that God's will for salvation has not been withdrawn. God's stubborn love never gives up on anyone, even stubborn people who disobey and refuse to listen to God's word. And we are called to share this message of God's stubborn love with people even if they do not listen. God does not give up. So don't give up. May you become a precious prophet who proclaims and demonstrates God's persistent love. Amen.