

Intro To The Prophets, Ezekiel 36: 22-28

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Are you feeling victorious today? Easter has come and here we are in this new joyous reality that God's love and goodness has already won, and we can live joyously and victoriously not because all pain and struggle have been removed in our lives, but because joy breaks through in spite of the challenges!

And there are *plenty* of challenges. All around us and on the news; so much violence and despair. The Artemus II has been a welcome diversion from this though. I observed the reentry and splashdown of the Artemus II Friday night and was surprised at how riveted I was to watching as the sea crew slowly and deliberately got the crew out of the capsule and back on to land. It was good to see something go well, and be so positive and expansive and hopeful!

But not all of us can jump on a spacecraft and shoot off into space to escape a world that is far from harmonious. We are here, still on this giant spacecraft we call Earth, as one of the astronauts called it, steadily orbiting the sun.

We as a church, and as individuals, can feel so angry and disappointed or even *outraged* at the blatant injustices and cruelty all around us. We don't have to go looking for this. It finds us when we open the newspaper, watch the evening news, or open up our social media feeds, showing up screaming at us in ALL CAPS. And we say "God, if Easter resurrection is not just about our lives being resurrected after death, but is about living victoriously in this life knowing death and brokenness don't have the last word, how can things still feel so utterly broken?"

Today, we begin a new series on the OT Prophets. For the next 8 or 9 weeks, Pastor Lois and I will be looking at a number of the prophets, usually spending just a week on each, kind of summarizing the whole of the book that bears their name. We'll be drawing some thoughts and ideas from Richard Rohr's latest book "The Tears of Things: Prophetic Wisdom For an Age of Outrage" as well as other resources in addition to our own vast knowledge and insight 😊. Also, the Seekers and Sojourners Sunday school class is reading "The Tears of Things"

together in SS, and Pastor Lois and I will be joining their discussions on it when we can to glean their thoughts and reflections as well.

Although I have chosen a passage from Ezekiel 36 that Brendon read, I won't be focusing much on any one prophet today, but will instead be trying to get us thinking more about the prophetic genre as a whole. And I will highlight some of the important things to keep in mind as we read and try to understand the prophets and the whole of what they were trying to communicate back in their time, and if they may still have something to say to us in our context today in this current "age of outrage".

First, a bit about Richard Rohr and his background. Richard was born and raised close to Topeka, Kansas in 1943! He grew up on his family's wheat farm until he went to a Franciscan seminary at the ripe old age of 14. Eventually he became a priest in the Franciscan order of the Catholic Church first in Topeka and then in Cincinnati Ohio. Franciscans are active followers of Jesus and the example of St. Francis of Assisi, whose radical embrace of simplicity and compassion somewhat reshaped medieval Catholic Christianity.

Quick bit of church history. About 300 years after that first Easter, the Roman emperor Constantine was converted to christianity, and persecution of the early christians of course ended abruptly and christianity became the universal religion of the Roman empire. The Roman empire built huge beautiful churches and funded the clergy. By the end of the fourth century, the extravagant wealth and excesses and abuses of power of the universal church with its purse strings controlled by the government became so obvious to some of the deeper thinking folks that it drove them out into the desert to escape or withdraw from the shallowness of it all. Those so-called desert fathers and mothers devoted their lives to deep prayer and contemplation. They formed communes and monasteries of like minded people who lived separately from society as a whole.

One of these monastics, St Francis of Assisi, came along in the 13th century. Francis felt like while withdrawing from society to pray was good, the practice of prayer and contemplation alone—and just learning how to live in relative harmony with like-minded people in a monastery, wasn't really all that Christ-like. Jesus withdrew to the desert to pray, yes, and hung out with his friends, yes, but he then **returned** to society to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to clothe the naked,

to befriend those estranged or pushed to the margins of society. Francis and those that followed his lead—they took *action*. Yet they stayed contemplative. Go and have an experience of serving and living among the poor. Or better yet, literally give up all your wealth and status and go BE the poor! Then in that setting of living and serving and being among the poor—there, do your contemplation, reflection, and prayer.

This movement became the Franciscan movement that slowly continued to reform some of the Catholic church, even after the Protestant Reformation, and after the Anabaptists emerged as a third way—the Franciscans continued to model and call Catholics to service. There was also the Poor Clares, a women’s movement that followed the same calling, but modeled by Clare of Assisi. The Franciscans and the Poor Clares took vows of: poverty & simplicity, service to the poor and marginalized, peacemaking, joyful care for creation, humility and fraternity (brotherhood/sisterhood). You may have seen artwork of St Francis of Assisi where he is surrounded by all kinds of wild animals and birds. It is said that he had so much love for creation and all creatures that they became his brothers and sisters. He was also known for not taking a bath, ever! (describe cartoon rendering) His fellow monastics described how they could tell when he’d returned to the monastery for the night by his smell even before they saw him!

You may have heard the beautiful prayer , “Lord, make me an Instrument of your peace“ of St Francis that I will use as a benediction today. And there is the paraphrase of Jesus' words that has been attributed to St. Francis of Assisi that Mennonites seem to love, (maybe a little too much!) “Go therefore into all the world and preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words”

And Richard Rohr is a Franciscan, a follower of St Francis. These convictions are at the core of the ministry that Richard founded in Albuquerque NM called the *Center for Action and Contemplation*. The name expresses the conviction that being a follower of Jesus requires action and contemplation working in tandem. Without action, our Bible reading and studying, prayer and meditation soon become self-serving or inward focused. Likewise, action, or active engagement in trying to make the world better—without contemplation and prayer can become more about serving our own ego needs or placating our anger—rather than serving the needs of our fellow humans with the love that Jesus taught and lived.

Several years ago Richard turned over the leadership of this ministry, and now lives in a little hut with his little dog Opie in some undisclosed location somewhere in the high desert of New Mexico. He sometimes receives visitors in his little hut for a podcast or interview, and he's occasionally brought down to the city for speaking engagements. I actually got to hear Richard speak in person when I attended a CAC convention in Albuquerque last October the weekend before I came to be a pastoral candidate here at Alexanderwohl.

Well, that's some background about Richard. I think you will find that many of his thoughts and ideas are quite relevant to our current cultural situation, and you will see that his Franciscan theology intersects quite well with Anabaptist and Mennonite ideals (hopefully not the part about personal hygiene!) even though Anabaptists and The Franciscans have quite different origin stories and pathways that have led them to today.

Well, that's enough about Richard and the Franciscans and church history for now. You may notice that I will be doing a little more quoting and paraphrasing than usual today in this introduction.

Ok, so back to the prophets and their motives, and the feelings of outrage that **we** may experience when we consider the brokenness we observe all around us and in our social media and we want to climb on to the highest platform we can find and scream at everyone who will listen: "This is soooo wrong!"

With that image in your mind, tell me: when you hear the word prophet, what comes to your mind? Loud shouting judgement? An angry wild-haired and wild-bearded man ranting at the people of Israel for their many sins and telling them to turn or burn? If so, you're not wrong, they do plenty of that. And there are some women prophets as well btw..

But there is more to the prophets than the ranting and raging. Yes, they called Israel many, many times to return to Yahweh and the covenant God had made with them on Mt Sinai. After delivering them out of slavery in Egypt, God gives them the Ten Commandments that were designed to give shape to their lives in the Promised Land. They were to avoid lying, stealing, adultery, murder, coveting, etc. Richard Rohr says "This was Morality 101, the basic order without which a society cannot maintain itself". But the people kept coming up short

even in this introductory class, disastrously so. They substituted purity codes and external performance for the spirit of the commandments. They forgot the promises God had made with them, and how much God cared for them and chose idols or stand-ins for God. God needed someone who would call them to return to God's self, to warn them, critique them, and reveal God's heart to them.

Enter, the OT Prophets!

For hundreds of years, from about 1300 years before Christ and continuing through the eras of Israel's kingdom, their conquest, exile and return prophets like Samuel, Jonah, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel performed the vitally important task of being truth-tellers, agents of change, messengers of divine revelation, and deconstructors of every prevailing order (sometimes even beyond Israel!). And the prophets were by en large insiders, officially licensed critics so to speak, who named and exposed their *own group's* shadow side. Richard observes that few cultures developed such a unique and counterintuitive role. Developing civilizations are too busy building and doing whatever it takes to be successful and have little time for self-critique.

The prophets seem most active from the time of Moses up to about 5 centuries before Jesus. After the exile, except for Malachi and some of Zachariah, the prophets seem to sort of fade out of the biblical account. And perhaps that is why the people of Jesus's time were not ready for him, Richard speculates. Without the prophets calling them to maintain their identity, the religious and spiritual community was too dispersed to know how to maintain a strong inner spiritual life. External observance took over—symbolized by the scribes and the Pharisees that Jesus rebukes repeatedly for being all about outer appearances.

Without prophets to bring critique and reform from within, Richard says, they, and we, tend to settle for reform through violent revolutions and self righteous reformations, and our history becomes about ferreting out heretics, imprisoning and persecuting and murdering those that don't conform, and protecting ambitious in-groups, each more invested in their own rightness than the previous group.

The prophets, though, see when the status quo is not working. God sends them to blow up the system from within by causing what Richard calls a "holy

disorder”, a scenario in which the fundamental conditions and relationships of the religious group are disrupted (exile). The disruption can take positive or negative form. Either people recognize their limited understanding and grow with God, or they regress due to their inability to love and trust the process—and the society reverts to legalism and formality until it disintegrates. From either of these disruptions, a new order arises, a re-order in which human relations can work at a higher level that is more imaginative, less dualistic, and usually less violent than the previous order. But, **that** re-order soon becomes the new order, and we need prophets to proclaim some more disorder to keep us from idolizing the *new* status quo! It’s not hard to see how prophets were hated, is it?

If that’s their calling and job to pronounce disorder and break the system so that new order can break in, and not to deliver a package of what that will look like, what can gain from their writings today? Are they just angry, demanding and bitter truth-tellers with little value in their place in our OT other than helping us to understand why the old temple system came up so short and sets the stage for God to do a big time intervention by showing up on earth as Jesus, the ultimate prophet?

I think (and Richard Rohr thinks, and Lois!) there is much to be gained from the prophets—not so much by trying to understand every nuance of the ins and outs of the cultural contexts and every single thing they are taking Israel to task about. There is plenty of value there that we can observe. But equally important may be the overall observation of how the prophets themselves evolve spiritually over time throughout their prophetic career.

Richard says “Like most of us, the prophets started out not only with judgementalism and anger, but also with a superiority complex of placing themselves above others. Then, in various ways, that outlook falls apart over the course of their writings. They move from that anger and judgementalism to a reordered awareness in which they become more like God: more patient like God, more forgiving like God, more loving like God”. There are some exceptions, Jonah being one that comes to mind who is still angry at the end of the book—mad at God for being so merciful. And we’ll cover that later in our series along with a couple of other prophets that Richard calls “unfinished” prophets.

But in most of the prophets, this internal movement can be seen over the course of their writings. Is it because the people listen and get it and start living more faithfully? Not usually, although the people of Nineveh might be an exception! But no, the prophets are often ignored or hated, or persecuted. So what is it that moves the prophets away from judgementalism and demand?

Tears. That's right, tears.

The prophets come to see the profound connection between their anger and tears. They first needed to get good and angry about injustices and oppression. Anger can be necessary and motivate us to seek necessary change. But we can't stay there or we injure our own souls and will undoubtedly pass on the hurt to others in all kinds of ways.

I will quote Richard again here. "The prophets learn what most of us don't, that all things *have* tears and all things *deserve* tears. They know that grief and sadness are doorways to understanding life in a non-egocentric way". They help us to see a God who weeps for God's people! When we can imagine a God who weeps for and with us, this generates deep empathy in us. This way of tears and the deep vulnerability that it expresses, is in opposition to our normal ways of seeking control through willpower, commandment, force, retribution, and violence. It's hard to be on the attack when you are weeping, they discover.

Prophets, Richard says, are truth-tellers that pull back the veil to reframe our preferred storyline of history: the predictable narrative of winners and losers, rewards and punishments. They are those rare individuals who see and point out reality in its fullness dimension, rather than in dualities like totally right or totally wrong, all good or all bad. We'll come back to this notion of dualism in coming weeks.

The prophet Ezekiel quotes God as saying it like this: "I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove your stony heart from your body and replace it with a living one, and I will put my spirit in you...you will be my people and I will be your God."

If there was ever a time when living hearts rather than stony hearts were needed, it seems like now in this ultra polarizing time where the pressure is so strong to choose a political side, dig in, lob bombs of reposts on our social media, fully

convinced that all the rightness is on our side and the total wrongness of the opposing side.

Friends, if you do find that your default state is anger and bitterness these days, we invite you along on this study of the prophets, and how they move from anger to sadness, to tears. You may begin to see the patterns that emerge that can help us in our day and age. You will be encouraged to see that even our righteous anger held too long is not only not good for our health, it robs us of the abundant life that Jesus promised us in John 10:10. And if we sit prayerfully with our anger, maybe even with the help of a therapist, we may find that behind that anger could be something else, perhaps unresolved childhood issues that we would do well to better understand and release.

In so doing, we may find ourselves, like the prophets, moving from anger and outrage to weeping and sadness as the Spirit moves us toward healing.

And with Jesus as the ultimate prophet and model, may we ease down from the Easter high and gracefully re-enter this atmosphere of this spaceship called earth where troubles abound. May the gentle splashdown return of the salty taste of our own tears soften or wash the windows of our heart and give us clear eyes to see the world in Easter's resurrection hope. May our people know we're close by—not by the smell of some ascetic bad hygiene—but by the sweet aroma of hope in Jesus the Christ that keeps being resurrected in our lives each and every day. May it ring in our hearts like a joyful church bell on a crisp Easter morning ringing out across the parking lot, and the cemetery and the green wheat fields through our communities and our land and resound throughout the entire world—even in this age of outrage!

We've got so much to celebrate!

Rohr, Richard, *The Tears of Things: Prophetic Wisdom For and Age of Outrage*. Center for Action and Contemplation, Inc. Convergent Books, Penguin Random House LLC, 2025