

December 4, 2016 (Second Sunday of Advent)

TEXT: John 3:22–30

TITLE: What Prophets Say About Jesus

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Our focus for the next several weeks will be on Jesus Christ. Well, that's not quite accurate. As a Christian church, our focus is always on Jesus. But as we move through the season of Advent and await both the birth of the Christ child and anticipate the coming of Christ as the eternal Prince of Peace, our focus is really on Jesus. Today we will look at what prophets have said about Jesus of Nazareth. Next week we'll look at what his friends said about Jesus, followed in two weeks by considering what his family said about Jesus.

Prophets in the bible have long been misunderstood, and the fault for this rests firmly on our own shoulders. When you hear the word "prophet," what image comes to mind? Do you picture someone making a prediction about the future, a fortune teller gazing into a crystal ball? Professor Trelawney from Harry Potter or Karnak the Great from Johnny Carson? That's not the way biblical prophets work. Biblical prophets didn't make predictions about the future. Instead they spoke about what is to come based on what they saw around them in the present world. We have lesser versions of these prophets right here today. There are the "Mom Prophets": *If you don't clean up your messy room, you will be in big trouble later.* The "Dad Prophets": *If you don't change the oil in your car every 3000 miles, it will ruin the engine someday.* And the "Teacher Prophets": *If you don't study for this test today, you will flunk the course tomorrow.*

Prophets in the bible looked at the world around them and, based on what they saw, would make predictions about what was to come. Earlier we heard a reading from the prophet Isaiah. For several chapters, he warned that the children of Abraham needed to trust in the Lord. Instead they foolishly trusted in military alliances, provoking the Assyrian army to overrun their entire land. Having predicted the consequences of what was to come, Isaiah added a word of hope about a coming Messiah arising from the family of Jesse and King David, one who will rule with justice and righteousness. Isaiah could say this because he knew the heart of God, who was with them in their present crisis and would not abandon them in the days to come.

700 years later, another prophet would do much the same thing: John the Baptist. He would look at the people struggling under Roman oppression and failing to trust in the Lord, and call them to do what was right—to bear fruits that befit the faith they claimed to profess. John baptized them in water and told them to lead lives of righteousness, even as he too offered a word of hope—telling them that one was coming whose sandals he was not worthy to untie, one sent by God who would separate wheat from chaff, goodness from idle words and unfaithful deeds. By knowing the God of the present, John could tell them about how this same God would act in the days to come.

What's fascinating, though, is that the bible also tells us how John the Baptist reacted when his own prediction came true—when the one sent by God actually appeared in their midst—when Jesus and his disciples were teaching and baptizing people and drawing bigger crowds than John. Some people came to John and, in effect, said, “Look, you were right! Your prediction came true. But aren't you upset because in your moment of glory, when you've been proved to be a great prophet, this newcomer is drawing people away from you. How does that make you feel?” John could have said a lot of things. But being a true man of God, he said what he'd always said: *I am not the Messiah; he is. He is the bridegroom; I'm just the best man.* And most profoundly: *He must increase, but I must decrease.* John doesn't say those words with regret. Amazingly, he talks about decreasing in the same breath as saying that his joy is overflowing. Something about the presence of this Savior made it self-evident to John—even a joy to John—that he should decrease while Christ steadily increases.

Just as our definition of being a prophet needed to be revised, perhaps our understanding of “decreasing”—of showing humility—needs to be adjusted. Since political leaders, Hollywood stars and other celebrities routinely make such a big deal about how great they are, perhaps we need to listen to John the Baptist and re-learn the value of Christian humility and decreasing in the eyes of the world.

Here's a quick definition: Humility is not that you think less of yourself; it simply means you think of yourself less. Humility comes from a lack of self-centeredness or self-consciousness. For example, when you play a game or when you create a work of art, your focus is not on yourself but on something else. In that moment, you are not diminished. In fact, you may be of greater worth and accomplish greater things precisely because you are humble—not caring who gets the credit—not limited by self-doubts or personal vanity.

In times of humility, we come down off our high mountains and suddenly see things through the eyes of others. Let me concrete about this: More than 1 in 5 children in America are being raised in poverty. Those children and families don't need us to tell them what to do from our lofty perch. They need us to humbly walk beside them, to decrease long enough to hear their stories and recognize that the issue is not about food or shelter, but rather about how they have no way out. Too many children are part of the “broken class” whose lives are marred by violence, mental illness, drugs, sexual abuse, and a punitive criminal justice system. We as a society failed them long before they failed us.¹

In Western PA we talk a lot about the lost steel industry. Yes, we need to humbly decrease so we can hear our colleagues tell stories of families and communities harmed by industrial changes over the past half century. But just as there are 64,000 steelworkers in America, more significant is the fact that there are now 820,000 home health aides—who provide services for poverty wages, around \$23,000 a year, less than \$2000 a month.² We need to hear their stories too.

When we wonder what should be done about these and so many other woes in our world, scripture guides us. The prophet John the Baptist modeled this type of faithful decrease. Jesus Christ did as well. We should follow their example, stepping away from privilege and power so that we can listen and serve and connect again. Henri Nouwen said, *Jesus always leads to littleness. It is the place where misery and mercy meet. It is the place where we encounter God.*³

Now, this type of decreasing and humility is not a move into powerlessness. Thomas Merton said, “Humility sets us free to do what is really good by showing us our illusions and withdrawing our will from what was only an apparent good.”⁴ Humility and faithful decrease provide us the grace to face our own creatureliness with dignity, trusting in another power that will carry us through times of darkness. We are to trust in Christ, the one who must increase, just as we must decrease. St. Augustine a long time ago put it this way: *I listen; Christ is the one who speaks. I am enlightened; Christ is the light. I am the ear; Christ is the word.*

When the prophets have spoken about Jesus Christ, they are reminding us that this world is not the ultimate reality. We are all distracted by what we see around us and persuaded to chase false idols and false dreams. However, the one who was and is and who will be brings us in contact with true reality. As John the Baptist said, knowing this renews us and gives us real joy. This holy One, this Jesus the Christ must increase—must take precedence—even as we must decrease—must step back, slow down, and see things from his perspective.

Sharing a meal is a good place to start. Allow yourself to come to Christ’s table and be served by another. For it is in losing our lives that we find them. Let the light of Christ enlighten you – let the words of Christ be heard by you—and may Christ increase in you, through you, so your joy may be complete.

AMEN

¹ Cf. “3 TVs and No Food: Growing Up Poor in America,” Nicholas Kristof, *New York Times*, October 30, 2016.

² “On Money”, Binyamin Appelbaum, *New York Times Magazine*, October 9, 2016, p. 22.

³ Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak*, 1990, p. 88.

⁴ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 65.