

Micaiah the Prophet: Of Prophets, True and False, and Kings

I Kings 22: 1-9

If you look at the Table of Contents in your Bibles you will see Major Prophets in one section of books and Minor Prophets in another. There was this overly clever and quite unprepared student who came to his religions class for a test. First question: “Name the major and minor prophets.” He wrote in “Who’s to judge?”

I’ve always wanted to preach a sermon on Micaiah ben Imlah. He is mostly overlooked, but we should not call him a “minor prophet.” We don’t find him in stained-glass windows, but he is indeed one of God’s “peculiar treasures.” His story is about the inevitable and perennial clash between prophets and kings. And it is about how to tell the difference between true and false prophets, for his day and ours.

I

In the story the king of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, is itching to go to war. He is not named, but he is Ahab, one of Israel’s worst kings. I like that he is not named because this king is the “every-king”. And Micaiah is the epitome of a prophet, a truth-teller to those in power.

The king of Israel is making plans for a military attack on Ramoth-gilead so to recapture it for Israel. He says to Jehoshaphat the king of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, “Do you know that Ramoth-gilead belongs to us, and we are doing nothing to take it back!” The only land a king ever wants is the land next to his!

So he asks Jehoshaphat—of “Jumping Jehoshaphat” fame—to go to war with him. The goal of Jehoshaphat’s long kingship was to end the animosity between Israel and Judah and reunite the Southern and Northern kingdoms. So when asked to join, he said, “I am as you are; my people are your people, my horses are your horses.” A fateful decision.

But Jehoshaphat was also the wiser and more devout of the two, so he then suggested that Ahab first “inquire for the word of the Lord.” So the king of Israel assembled his 400 prophets, his “Spiritual Advisory Committee.” They were selected and trained to say exactly what the king wanted them to say. The 19th century novelist George Eliot in one of her novels wrote about the “well-employed” preachers of her day who were always employed “because they are tools with smooth handles.”

II

So the king summoned the 400 prophets and asked: “Shall I go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I forbear?”

And they in happy chorus said: “Go up; for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king!” Music to the king’s ears.

But Jehoshaphat said, “Is there not another prophet of the Lord of whom we may inquire?” Ahab said, “There’s one, Micaiah ben Imlah, but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me but evil!” Jehoshaphat said, “Let not the king say such a thing!”. He had a little backbone left. So then the king summoned Micaiah to come to the king’s throne room.

I must pause here for a moment. Kings always wrap themselves in a circle of yes-sayers, the king’s political cabinet, the king’s court priests and hand-selected prophets. Our former president, Donald Trump, had his “Spiritual Advisory Council.” They were carefully selected to say yes to what he wanted to do. They would have prayer meetings and lay hands on him. You may have seen the photos. Prominent Southern Baptist pastors were well represented on the Council.

But in truth all Presidents work to get the support of the religious community that they might baptize their policies. When Jimmy Carter was President, he was working on a SALT treaty, Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty. He invited a group of religious leaders to the White House to be briefed on the treaty and hopefully gain support for it. It’s goal was to lessen the prospect of nuclear war, a noble goal. I was one of those invited. The official letter came on

the White House stationary. It was a pretty heady experience. I hoped I was not one of those tools with a smooth handle and would not be swayed by enticements of power. Power is an aphrodisiac.

Richard Nixon rarely went to church on Sundays. Instead he held worship services in the White House. The preachers invited to preach were carefully vetted to say only what the President wanted to hear. A book came out during those years entitled *Sermons Not Preached in the White House*. Micaiah was the type to have a sermon in that book.

II

The king's messenger came to Micaiah with the invitation. He said; "All the prophets are of one accord and favorable to the king; let your word be like their word." Micaiah said he would go, but added, "As the Lord lives, what the Lord says to me, that I will speak."

So he was whisked into the throne room of the king. The king asked him the same question: Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we forear?"

Micaiah, in a voice strangely not like his said: "Go up and triumph; the Lord will give it to you!" An echo of the 400 prophets. What?! It may have been in the way he said it, but the king knew something was fishy. Micaiah never had been

anything but a plague of bad news to the king. So he said to Micaiah: “How many times have I told you to say nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord!?”

So now Micaiah spoke what the Lord had revealed to him:

I saw all Israel scattered upon the mountains as sheep without a shepherd; and the Lord said, “These have no master; let each return to his home in peace.

This was not what the king wanted to hear. He turned to Jehoshaphat and said, “Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy good concerning me but evil?”

How many of you remember the comic duo Laurel and Hardy? Ahab was like Oliver Hardy, bopping Stan Laurel on the head, saying, “Another nice mess you’ve gotten me into!”

Then Zedekiah, who was one of the king’s carefully chosen priests, walked to him and stuck him on the cheek and said, his voice dripping with sarcasm: “So how did the Lord’s Spirit pass from me to *you*?” Micaiah said, “You’ll find that out when you are fleeing to hide in your inner chamber.”

Overhearing this confrontation the king said, “Seize him and take him to the official in charge and say, ‘Put this man in prison, and feed him reduced rations of bread and water until I come back in victory and peace.’” Unbowed,

Micaiah said, “If you return in victory and peace, the Lord has not spoken by me.” Then he looked to everyone there and said: “Hear you peoples, all of you!”

III

Prophets in jail. It seems to happen all through history: true prophets end up in jail. False prophets say what the kings want to hear. True prophets say what the king needs to hear. It rarely works out well for the true prophet.

In 1846 Henry David Thoreau spent the night in jail for refusing to pay the poll tax as a protest against slavery. Legend has it that he was visited that night by his close friend, brilliant essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson asked his friend, “Why are you in there?” Thoreau answered back, “What are you doing out there?”

On April 16, 1963 Martin Luther King Jr. was put in jail for leading a Civil Rights protest in Birmingham. While in prison he wrote the famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” It was addressed: “My dear fellow clergymen.” King was there for a direct action, non-violent protest. A prominent group of clergy in the city made a public statement calling his activity “unwise” and “untimely, “extremist.” Most clergy of the South in those days adopted a position called “gradualism.” The goals of the Civil Rights movement were right, they said, but we must move slowly. It was a good way to keep your job.

King's letter addressed all the clergy's concerns one by one and brilliantly articulated the meaning of non-violent action against unjust laws. King had hoped that local clergy would have joined in support and was deeply disappointed. It had happened time after time. In the letter he wrote of this disappointment.

...I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klan, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to "justice".

He was Micaiah writing to the 400 prophets of the king.

The role of heroes of courage and justice in our lives is not that we initiate them, but that we are inspired by them to do what God is calling *us* to do.

IV

So what happened in the story of Micaiah and the king? The king of Israel went to battle. As the two kings dressed for battle, Ahab said to Jehoshaphat, "You wear your royal robes, and I will wear a disguise over my armor." Nice friend, huh!? Ahab was Ahab through and through.

But what happened as they rode their chariots into battle? An arrow struck Ahab through his armor, and he began to bleed to death. His aides propped him up in the chariot so he could still lead them into battle. By the end of the day the battle was lost, and the soldiers shouted to each other: “Every man to his own house!”

They took Ahab’s body to be buried in Samaria, and by a pool in Samaria they washed out his chariot pooled with his blood. And the text says that dogs came and lapped his blood. A grizzly ending to a terrible king. (I kept this little detail in to wake some of you up who had drifted into sleep.)

V

The question comes back again. “What’s the difference between a true prophet and a false prophet?” Yes, one tells people in power what they want to hear, the other tells people in power what they need to hear.

- A false prophet is always well-employed. True prophets need to keep the phone number for *Uhaul* in their iPhone.

-The false prophet licks an index finger and lifts it into the air to see which way the wind is blowing. The true prophet has an inner guide, sensitive to the Spirit’s prompting.

Can *church* become a community of prophets? King called it the “church within the church.” The Reformation had on its banner “the priesthood of all believers.” Is there also “a prophethood of all believers?” Too many churches are “non-*prophet*” organizations. (O.K., you can groan, but it’s true!)

Our prophethood comes out as we stand against the prevailing winds of culture. It comes as we speak truth to those who hold power. It comes as we care for those Jesus called “the least of these”, as we become advocates and defenders for those who need it most, from the child at school to the homeless man to the addict. Last Monday was “National Coming-Out Day”, I call it “National Bravery Day.” It comes as we fight for justice, for justice is only love on a big scale.

It comes when a racist joke or a joke at the expense of another is told, and you don’t laugh, your silence your stand.

The prophetic church may be as outnumbered as the 400 false prophets of Ahab to the one lone Micaiah, but we keep on. Some churches have on their steeples a weathervane, symbol of the shifting winds of their loyalties. Others have a cross, as they follow one whose love for all put him on a Roman cross.

Micaiah’s last words on his way to jail are his words to us today: “Hear, you peoples, all of you.”

