



Year of the Word

For more resources, including other articles on Scripture, reflection questions on the Sunday readings, 10 ways your parish can promote Scripture, and much more, visit www.austindiocese.org or call (512) 476-4888.



Diocese of Austin
The Catholic Church
of Central Texas
512.476.4888
www.austindiocese.org
The Year of the Word 2007

Prophet's job is never done

By Beth Balsam

"Then the Lord extended his hand and touched my mouth, saying, "See, I place my words in your mouth!"

How many of us wish that God would give us the right words to say? The prophet Jeremiah would be quick to tell us that God's words are truthful and difficult at the same time!

A scriptural prophet interprets and communicates God's truth, even to us today. They are spokesmen of the Lord, a kind of middle-voice between God and the people. The prophets of the Old Testament knew they had a challenging mission and their enthusiasm for the task was often tempered by fear and frustration. Prophets repeatedly endured the difficulty of preaching to people whose hearts were hardened by idolatry and pride. Being a prophet was an unpopular job and many were persecuted, imprisoned, banished, or even killed.

The books of the prophets comprise the largest section of the Old Testament, yet despite this sizeable collection, prophets are not primarily writers but persistent speakers and political activists. They were driven by their love for God and could not be quiet! When studying this part of the Bible, it is good to read the passages out loud to audibly hear the strong prophetic words.

Prophets functioned like a conscience, always reminding the people of God's generosity and love and encouraging them to live those values with others. One such prophet, Nathan, carefully informed King David of sinful actions concerning Bathsheba, a beautiful woman. Nathan faced the power of the Israelite king to bring a sword to his neck and needed to be clever when he presented an unpleasant reality to David.

Imagine that you discovered that your boss used his power and authority to improperly take advantage of an employee. Would you talk to your boss about it? If so, how would you explain the wrongness of his actions? Nathan was in a similar situation. Fortunately for Nathan, David listened and accepted his responsibility. In this case, the prophet's exhortations were fruitful: Nathan warned David, David repented, and Nathan extended God's mercy to David.

Prophecies about Israel's future were intimately connected to the present attitudes and actions of the people. Prophets were not predicting random, unexpected events and consequences. They may have seemed ridiculous to those who refused to live according to the Law, but they were perfectly logical to God and the prophets.

Even today, parents prophesy in a similar way with common sense insight: "If you touch the burner on the stove you will burn your hand." Likewise, the Old Testament prophets simply explained what would happen if the people continued to defy the Lord. Through it all, they stressed that Yahweh is the God of justice and mercy. There can be no doubt that God demands righteousness from his people and at the same time it is certain that God will not withhold forgiveness.

Among the usual warnings and pleadings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel announced a future of salvation for the people of God. The promise of a messiah created hope that the fractured relationship with the Lord could be restored. The revitalized spirit of the new covenant proclaimed the astounding love of Yahweh made real in human flesh as Immanuel, God with us. John the Baptist, the great New Testament prophet, continued the tradition of the Old Testament prophets by saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!" Many listened to John, acknowledged their sins, and came to him for baptism. Are we listening? Do we hear the words of the prophets deep in our hearts? "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Beth Balsam teaches religious education in Catholic schools and holds a master's degree in theology from St. Mary's University in San Antonio.