

Shouldn't the Psychic Friends be the Ones to Call You?

Jeremiah 1: 4-10; Luke 4: 21-30

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Anyone who has read the stuff I've written know that my tastes lean towards programming that gives TV its title: "The Idiot Box." Since, the two Bible passages today deal with prophesy, it did get me to remember something that no longer appears on the televised landscape as frequently: commercials for phone-in psychics, 900 numbers featuring some Tarot card reader or D-list celebrity promoting THEIR psychics as being the ones that will tell you what you want to know. Although I have never called one of these numbers, I have always found many Christians' aversion to all things psychic a bit curious since many of the people in the old and new testaments were known for telling the future (albeit not for \$1.99 a minute for entertainment purposes only). Furthermore, some Christians have interpreted events as signs of God's pleasure or displeasure, most recently of note Pat Robertson's statement that the earthquake in Haiti may be because of a reported pact between the Haitian people and the Devil. Still, like all fads, the psychic hotlines have now disappeared due to allegations of fraud or people coming to their senses and people who interpret events as being God's wrath tend to move on once their name disappears from the headlines or they are presented with a plausible counter argument. A friend of mine once stated that, if these people are psychic and if they're your friend, they should know you need help and know how to get a hold of you.

In the passages today we have both a prophet and someone fulfilling a prophecy. Jeremiah is called by God to warn Judah that they have broken the covenant with God by worshipping foreign idols and, as such, they will be invaded by the Babylonian army. In the gospel passage today, Jesus has just read one of the prophecies from Isaiah and tells the people at the temple that the prophesy has been fulfilled in their hearing, indicating that he is the Messiah. The people at the temple then become mad at Jesus because he will not perform the miracles that they've heard of him doing in other places. What's more, he says that no one here will accept him and, like the prophets Elijah and Elisha, God has called him to people who are not part of the national of Israel.

Although Jesus and Jeremiah lived a few centuries apart from one another, I think some of the parallels in their stories bear remarking upon. First, both Jesus and Jeremiah are charged with telling people something that they really didn't want to hear. A trait of the psychic hotlines is that they often advertise how their clairvoyants have told people of good things happening to them in the future. I think both had audiences that were content with the status quo and having someone saying everything would change didn't earn them any popularity points.

Second, both were compelled by God to deliver their respective messages even though it would mean a great deal of grief for them. We hear in the first part of the passage in Jeremiah his protestations that he is too young to be any kind of prophet. However, God says he must go everywhere he sends him and say whatever God tells him to say. God then goes on to say not to be afraid and he will protect Jeremiah, if that is not foreshadowing that Jeremiah's message would ruffle some feathers, I don't know what is. Jeremiah was attacked, imprisoned, and even beaten by his own family for preaching that God was displeased with his people. Only after Judea was invaded by the Babylonians and the Judeans were scattered all across the empire did Nebuchadnezzar order Jeremiah released from prison putting an end to his persecution.

Although there is no mention in the Bible of Jesus having reservations about being rejected, in Nazareth we do know what he said did not go over very well. The people of Nazareth were so angry at Jesus that they gathered to throw him off a

cliff. Although nothing came of this threat, how many of us willingly invite that kind of rejection and contempt upon ourselves? Commentaries I've read on the passage in Luke say that the people of Nazareth were "too close" to Jesus and their inability to believe that he was the messiah was almost a given. I can certainly identify with this interpretation, if I went back to my hometown and started preaching that I was the messiah, my family and neighbors would probably think that vegan diet I tried in college must have had some strange side effects. If Nazareth's rejection of Jesus was so certain, why go there in the first place?

Lastly, unlike what we've seen in popular media, God did not tell people about what was to come in order to avoid it, but to explain why it had to happen. In the "Back to the Future" films, Marty McFly is shown his bleak future in order to prevent it from happening. However, God did not tell Jeremiah to say "Judah will be invaded unless..." but "Judah will be invaded because..." In truth, King Josiah was actually making reforms that would bring the kingdom back to the covenant with God, but the sins of his father and grandfather were too severe for God to give them a pass. Likewise, if Jesus performed the miracles in Nazareth, he probably would have won over the people (although it is a contradiction, I think we can all agree faith is so much easier when you have proof). However, Nazareth had to accept Jesus at his word and not based on any deeds.

Given all this analysis, we could ask why did God reveal to his people things that were going to happen if not to change them, knowing the message would fall on deaf ears, and all the headaches it caused for those charged with delivering his prophecies? I believe one explanation for why deals with the subject of experience.

Although we are of varying ages and backgrounds, I think all of us can remember a time where we had a very unpleasant experience that we would not want to go through again in a million years. However, that experience may also have been a valuable lesson to us in what we should do or not do and we walked away from it a better person. This may have taken the form of a job that didn't work out, a relationship that ended badly, or maybe something we had thought we were meant for turned out to be not for us. My own experience was when I attempted graduate school many years ago. The faculty found my performance to be not up to their expectations and I was asked to withdraw from the program. Although I still remember that experience as being very negative, it also forced me to seriously look at my life and find that I really didn't desire to be an academic, that maybe I was going to grad school because that's what the other members of my family did; and I was able to direct my life in a different way and to one in which I was able to find personal fulfillment through other avenues of life

All of you have probably heard of kids wanting to touch the heating elements of the stove despite parental warnings that it's hot, yet only the experience of them burning their hand is enough to sate their curiosity. I am no expert in child development but I think the parents here can agree that at times failure, disappointment, and heartbreak were better teachers for your children than success and happiness.

Continuing in my portrayal of God as a parental figure, it is usually not enough to punish someone but to get them to understand why they are being punished. Those who still adhere to the use of corporal punishment state it is not enough to spank a child but they must know and appreciate why they are being spanked in order for them to understand what they did wrong. If you spank a child without making sure they understand why it is happening, it could serve to only punish and not to reform. Perhaps God called upon Jeremiah to deliver his prophecy of impending doom not to give the kingdom of Judah a way out, but so that they understood why what was happening needed to happen. Maybe it was this experience, along with many other trials God's people endured, that strengthened them and made them faithful even in the most difficult of times. I do not mean to diminish or justify the oppression the Jewish people (or any other people) have

endured at the hands of others for the sake of a “greater good,” but I find it an inescapable fact that the resilience and perseverance many people are known and admired for is usually developed through adversity and not through “smooth sailing” through life.

In the gospel reading today, perhaps it is not the people of Nazareth who need to experience something but Jesus himself. When he taught at the Synagogue in Nazareth, it was still very early in his ministry and, so far he had been very well received by all. However, as the Gospel tell us, that would not be the case in the future. Perhaps it was this initial experience of being rejected by people who may have been his friends and family that gave him the strength to stand up to those who constantly criticized and challenged him.

So we now have some ideas as to why God chose to tell people about what was coming or happening presently and not warning them to straighten up or else. So what does this mean for us? If someone claims to be a prophet should we automatically pay attention to them and follow their advice? The next time Pat Robertson says “This tragedy occurred because God is displeased with us!” should we start listening to him? I don’t think so because, if God inflicted great tragedy on the world every time people made grave mistakes, the ground would probably shake constantly. Furthermore, the situation with Jeremiah’s struggles as he tried to fulfill his role as a prophet shows that God does not promise life will be without struggle if we do what he tells us to, but that he will be with us when it occurs and support us during our times of strife. I think that all the people who have come forward to help during natural disasters like the earthquake in Haiti are proof of that. Also, frankly, I think if God is looking for a Prophet he could do a lot better than Pat Robertson.

So, getting back to the beginning of the sermon, maybe God is the actual “Psychic Friend” who tells us what we need to know, not what we want to hear, does not just let bad things happen, but lets humankind have the experiences that will make us better people; and he will call us and be with us through the struggles of life no matter if we think we are worthy or not.