

In the name of God, and of God's Son, and of God's Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Hebrew scholar Robert Alter has this to say about prophets: Long before the writings of the prophets appeared, "figures known as prophets... were identified as people given to ecstatic states when they were inhabited by the divine spirit. All of the prophets appear to have felt that they heard God speaking, the speech sometimes accompanied by visual revelations, or what would have amounted to paranormal experiences. Prophets were sometimes perceived as altogether transgressing the borders of sanity."

In other words, long before anyone thought to record the experiences of these people called prophets, they were recognized by their communities. Their communities knew that these folks sometimes had the feeling that they were outside of their bodies, and that a divine spirit came into them. These prophets, their communities knew, sometimes heard God speaking to them and had visions. And sometimes, the prophets' communities thought the prophets were just a little nuts.

God tells Ezekiel that God is sending him to speak to a stubborn people; but when God sends Ezekiel, those stubborn people will know that a

prophet has been among them. That God wants the people to know that a prophet has been among them speaks of hope; but how are the people to know that a prophet has been among them? How do we know when a prophet is among us?

The word of God spoken to us can bring so many things; it can be a comfort, it can be a challenge, it can be a call to repentance or a call to action. Most often, it is all of these things combined. A prophet can remind us of who we really are and who we should to struggle to be.

In our reading from Corinthians, Paul tells the Corinthians of his own experience. He speaks of himself in the third person, as if he's relaying a story told to him; but he is talking about himself, speaking about one of those ecstatic, out-of-body experiences that the long tradition of Hebrew prophets would be quite familiar with. Paul has had an extraordinary experience that he wants so much to think himself deserving of it, worthy of sharing the honour of a prophet; but he knows that this visitation from God's spirit is not at all due to his own worth. It is nothing Paul has earned. He struggles with the frailty we all share because we are human; Paul, in all his accomplishments and revelations, still has to struggle to live into

God's call for him. Like most of us, Paul would rather have all the achievement, and none of the struggle. And yet, it is in the struggle that Paul strengthens his relationship with God. It's not so much in the visions and divine revelations that Paul finds himself speaking to God; it is in his struggles. And it is in the struggles, not the ecstatic states, that Paul finds God's grace. And so he can only boast of that grace, not of his prophetic experience.

Last Sunday, we heard the story of Jairus, the leader of the local synagogue, and a nameless, bleeding woman, who were seen by God as equally beloved, equally blessed by the presence of Jesus with them, and were equally graced by the kind of healing only God could provide. Jairus, the woman, and the entire crowd along the shores of Galilee, knew that a prophet was among them. Jesus spoke words of truth; Jesus healed; and in today's Gospel reading, he brings that prophetic ministry back to his home town. But his home town, unlike that crowd on the other side of the sea of Galilee, resists acknowledging the clear signs that a prophet is among them. After all, this is someone they've known since his childhood. They know who he is and what he should be; a skilled laborer, the son of a local family. They don't want to believe that Jesus is a prophet sent by

God, even though they have listened to his wisdom and witnessed his deeds of power. But think about it: if this laborer's son could be called to be a prophet of God, then that call could happen to anybody. And I think that would make the people of Nazareth understandably a little nervous. What if God called one of them?

What if God pulled them out of their safe and certain lives, and sent them on divine paths? What if they suddenly perceived deep within themselves the vision that God had for them, and for their community, and for the world? They would have to act; even if it meant that people thought they were just a little nuts. How unsettling for these people to know that God could call any one of them to an unexpected life, to ministry that might alienate them from their family, or endanger them as they confronted authority? I can understand them wanting to push Jesus away, and to downplay anything he might have done. If they admit that God can work wonders through a carpenter's son, then they have to admit that God might be calling them to do and to be more than they ever imagined. And that could be a little scary.

And yet, God does call us; God does choose us. On some level, at some time in our lives, God calls us to the work of prophets. God asks us to speak words of truth, and of comfort; God asks us to repent ourselves, and to call others to repentance. God calls us all to action. God calls us to the struggle to live into who we were created to be; God knows that even if we have visions and transporting spiritual experiences, it is in our struggle to live into the fullness of our humanity that we will find relationship with God. “My grace is sufficient for you”, God tells Paul; for the power of God is made perfect in our weakness. It is in our sincere struggle to do and be our divinely created selves that the power of Christ dwells in us.

Instead of pushing away the prophet within and among us, like the people of Jesus’ hometown, let us admit our understandable human fears and doubts, and allow God’s grace to work with those weaknesses to accomplish what God has set us out to do. We as God’s people are witnesses to the presence of Jesus in our lives; we know that a prophet has been among us; our own lives are meant to reflect that divine revelation to the world. Let us not be daunted by the task of recalling our world to righteousness, of freeing those who are captive to darkness, of lifting up those who are bowed down; for whenever we are weak, then we are

strong. God has put a Spirit within us to stand us up on our feet and to send us out to do the work of God. So every day, let us echo the prophets and say, “Here am I”; and let’s go.