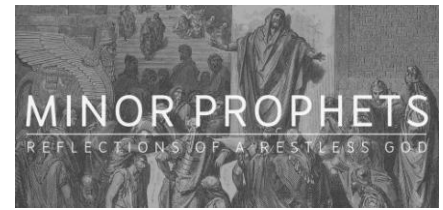


REFLECTIONS OF A RESTLESS GOD, Pastor Phil Strong

Text: 2 Peter 1:16-21

July 31, 2016



Growth Questions

“When is the last time someone in your life attempted to offer you a word of rebuke? How did you respond? When is the last time you spoke?”

“What unsettling circumstance are you currently facing as a result of your own lack of cooperation with God (benefit of the doubt)? What if this might be the time, the place where you discover who you are and what really matters? What if this is the place of transformation?”

“Is it hard for you to reconcile God’s anger and his love? Are you ever angered at the brokenness that someone you love is experiencing? Are you angered more by the decisions themselves or the pain and unnecessary grief it is causing them (and you)? Have you ever considered that anger is but another dimension of God’s jealous love for his creation?”

Teaching Notes

Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. These are the books of the Old Testament referenced as the “*minor prophets*”. To correct one simple assumption: they are not called “minor” due to the scope of their effectiveness or the nature of their content, but to the length of the writing. They are simply shorter offerings. The minor prophets reflect the history of the Israelites from approximately 740-400 B.C.

First, the Minor Prophets are the easiest to locate because it’s that section in the middle of your Bible where all of the pages are stuck together. And, second, it’s the prime resource for really cool baby boy names: Nahum, Obadiah, Zechariah. I wonder if the names were helpful at all in establishing some sense of validity and weight. I wonder if they would have been quite as revered if it said, “*The word of the Lord came to Tad*”, or, “*and God spoke through the prophet Herb...*” They just don’t have the same potency, do they?

Christianity is offered to us as a “prophetic” faith, in that it always seeks to ‘engage’ rather than ‘escape’ the prevailing culture.

Prophetic, in its most basic understanding, means that we are speaking from the perspective of another--- God’s perspective. We are seeing what he sees; feeling what he feels, which is not always apparent to everyone. Prophetic faith requires two movements:

- 1) **reception**--- where through persistent interaction with and understanding of God, our identity, our values, our ethic is informed and formed, and

- 2) **replication**--- our faith becomes incarnational. We demonstrate to the prevailing culture what it looks like to be the people of God, living out the revealed vision and values of God.

The prophetic nature of our faith being encapsulated in the oft repeated phrase, *“I will be your God and you will be my people”* (Exodus 6:7; Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 30:22). *“If this is the kind of God I am, this is the kind of people you should be.”*

Although the ‘times’ being addressed were unique, the context in which the prophets lived and spoke was not so dissimilar to our own. It was a context of competing stories and values. It was a time of unparalleled prosperity and devastating inequity; a time when the people looked to make alliances which they believed would create an environment of economic and political safety. It was a time of personal piety in the presence of moral decay. It was a time of heightened spiritual awareness/curiosity and overwhelming godlessness.

There are some basic themes woven throughout the prophets:

- 1) Historically, God has been incredibly faithful and patient.
- 2) Humanity has been habitually indifferent toward God and, at times, defiant in their rejection.
- 3) God refuses to sit idly by and watch humanity self-destruct without holding out the hope of something better. Repentance.

The prominent theme of prophecy is “exhortation”, not “prediction”.

The prophet’s primary intent was not to predict the future, but to cause the words of God to come to bear in a particular moment in history. Not to predict what’s going to happen, but to address what is happening! (don’t have to be prophetic to see...) They were messages full of warnings and hopeful promises. The outcome of having ignored such warnings? **“exile”**.

Exile and Restoration (homelessness and Presence; being displaced and returning; distanced from God and brought close) is the primary theme woven throughout the entire Story, from Genesis through the narrative of the Prophets, to Jesus himself.

Exile is where you end up when you forget who you are and why you are. It’s being in the context of a culture that “doesn’t speak your language”, that’s telling a divergent story; a culture with conflicting values and ethos (guiding beliefs).

In exile, one of two things is inevitable: either a people’s uniqueness becomes even more glaring (in which we would say they ‘shine as lights’, Philippians 2:15), or, a people’s identity is so absorbed into the prevailing culture that instead of ‘identifying with’ the culture, they are ‘identified by’ the culture and become virtually undetectable.

Some of the prophet’s writings were **pre-exilic** and were mostly concerned with some form of “remedial” warning. Contrary to our understanding of the prophets, judgment was not inevitable; it was not some irreversible decree initiated by God and forwarded through the prophets. Humanity could alter what appeared to be the inevitability of events with a change of heart; a change of mind; change of course.

Admittedly, sometimes these types of messages are hard to hear, but they are also hard to deliver in ways that challenge self-indulgent patterns of thought and self-destructive lifestyles without appearing self-righteous and condescending. It's hard to maintain a voice that resonates with grace while upholding a sense of responsibility. It would be tempting to either withhold hope altogether and keep the focus on Israel's failures in order to shame them into repentance, or present them with an image of a hopeful future which would be inevitable, despite their unfaithfulness.

We can only truly hear the words of the prophets with humility, otherwise, they are met with resistance and anger.

One of the truest expressions of the maturity and development of our faith is in our capacity for receiving rebuke, without defensiveness or alienation. Some of the prophets wrote while the Israelites were **in exile**. Interestingly, God never blamed Assyria or Babylon for the current situation that his people were experiencing. Instead of cursing the enemy, the prophet's words were rebukes of God's people who should have known better; who should have lived better.

In all of our lives, there is a time to warn of judgment and there is a time to shine the spotlight on God's grace.

"So, correct me Lord, but please be gentle". Jeremiah 10:24

Some of the people being addressed couldn't "hear" grace because they were not convinced that the situation was quite so desperate. The message of grace is lost on us until we are ready to admit and confront the severity of our condition. Exiles need not be reminded of their failure or their present life-circumstances as a result of their sin. They need something different. They need to confront the reality of their present circumstances, but hope for something better.

Exile is where transformation happens.

Even though God desired something better--- something less self-destructive --- it would now serve as the context for God's restorative work in them. It's "redemption" in the most profound sense of the word.

"I know what I have planned for you..." Jeremiah 29:11

Sometimes it easier to return (repent) once your circumstances become 'extreme'.

Strange how it's not until we are 'eating with the pigs' (Luke 15) that we come to our senses. Only when hardness of the heart is complete does it produce despair (loss of hope); only out of despair comes the potential for the heart to consider another way--- to reach out to God.

The purpose was not the exile itself, but the repentance and restoration that the exile was meant to produce.

The intent was never simply to punish the people for their insolent behavior, but to interrupt self-destructive patterns of thought and lifestyle which are personally corrosive and

communally harmful. The **post exilic** prophet's vision was the hope for a new life--- a better future--- which would emerge from the wreckage/chaos.

God has never proven to be interested in judgment for judgment's sake. His corrective and preventative actions toward undermining humanity's self-reliant attempts at progress was actually the most gracious thing that he could have done.

The prophets provide us with a vision of God who not only proclaims curses [the distortion of goodness and the dysfunctionality it produces] for our failure to live up to our covenant responsibility, but who willingly takes upon himself the consequences of our sin in order to bring us back home.

Jesus would experience his own form of exile and restoration: *"... he was oppressed and harshly treated... unjustly condemned, he was led away... it was our sorrows that weighed him down; all of our sins were laid on him... because of his experience, it will be possible for many to be made righteous..."* (Isaiah 53)

It was only the certainty of God's love that would allow the prophet to accept his anger.

"... O my faithless people, come home to me again and I will be merciful" (Jeremiah 3:12).

Despite the portrait often painted of God in the Old Testament, he appears almost 'desperate' to be merciful.