



# It Looks Like This Is Never Going to Stop

*TEXT*  
*Jeremiah 1:1-10*

November 1, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

**W**e have been reflecting on the generosity of God, and today I want to recognize that God's generosity is persistent in sending the prophets.

Creation is God's first act of love because it gives expression to God's desire that there be life.

The call of Abraham is a metaphor for all of our lives. We are called because the love of God pays attention to the details of our lives. What we do with our lives matters to the one who loves us.

The Ten Commandments are God's gift to a people who are lost.

What I haven't pointed out, but perhaps what you have noticed, is that all of these stories are stories of God's word. God speaks creation into being; apart from God's word, there is no life.

God speaks Abraham into a new purpose, to be a blessing to the entire creation.

God's words of command, like dots on the wilderness trail, show us the way to get home.

We worship a speaking God.

And the prophets are the ones who, again and again and again and again, speak a word to us —

not usually a new word. It is most often a word that we have heard before, but a word that we have forgotten or ignored or maybe never really believed and therefore failed to trust — or perhaps a word we just didn't believe was that important.

When we have been casual with God's word, I suppose God could just wipe God's hands of us and say, "I have had enough of these people." But instead, God sends prophets, over and over and over again, to remind us what matters to God.

The prophets make up a considerable amount of the Hebrew Bible, but it would not be unfair to say that there are two things about which the prophets expressed the most concern. The first was that God's people were too casual about the worship of God. There was too much difference between what was professed in worship and what was lived during the week, which is to be expected. But then when God's people came back to worship, there was little concern about the difference; forgiveness was expected and grace was taken for granted.

The second thing that the prophets decried was how casual God's people were about poverty. When some in Israel enjoyed a

time of economic prosperity, the prophets saw "income inequality," as we would call it today. Those at the top are doing very well, but across the street or the county line or the state line, or however it is these divisions live on the ground, there are those who work all day and still can't afford daily bread. The prophets in one voice would declare that when a person works all day and still can't afford to eat, something is wrong. And it's not just wrong with that person; it's wrong with all of us.

The prophets declared that God is not casual about poverty.

I'm glad that God did not call me to be a prophet. But I am even more grateful that God did and still does call some people to be prophets. I can't imagine what it would mean if God stopped calling prophets.

Reinhold Niebuhr, a theologian and preacher of the last century, said something I resonate with. He said that preachers in general lack courage. I think he's right about that. He wrote, "I think the real clue to the tameness of a preacher is the difficulty one finds in telling unpleasant truths to people whom one has learned to love."<sup>1</sup>

That's true. No one wants to tell unpleasant truths to people

they love. Well, I say no one, but I have known some folks who seemed to enjoy telling unpleasant truths. Jenny McDevitt calls them “drive-by truth tellers.” They are quick to see what is wrong with everything around them, and they take considerable joy in telling you all about it. They may think they are prophets, but I’m not so sure. This is important to understand: Prophetic speech, even when it is the talk of judgment, is still a language of love.

The prophets, almost to a person, were called to tell unpleasant truths to people they loved. No wonder Jeremiah didn’t want the job! He was one among a long list of prophets who God called to tell the truth — and it wasn’t an easy truth. What made it difficult is that the prophets could see that God’s people had messed up. They could see that the people had failed to be who God called them to be.

The prophets seldom told people things they didn’t know. They spoke on behalf of the poor. But the people knew their neighbors were poor; they just didn’t think it was that important. The prophets proclaimed that the people took God’s grace for granted, but they knew they were casual about worship. They just didn’t think it was that important.

I think it’s pretty easy to get confused about what really matters. And when we do, it’s pretty common for us to underestimate the consequences our actions have on others.

I was visiting with a friend several years ago. We were halfway through our coffee, and

I asked, “Tell me about your dad.” He got quiet and looked away. His eyes got moist. “My dad didn’t get me,” he said.

He then recounted a conversation that had happened 20 years ago, when he was a young adult. His dad said that what he was doing with his life was silly, not making a real contribution. He wondered why I would waste my life. “Tom, I can’t get those words out of my head. And you know, years later, when I finally got the nerve to confront him about it, he didn’t even remember the conversation. The thing I can’t forget is that he can’t remember.”

It’s pretty easy for us to underestimate the consequences our lives have on others. That’s why God keeps sending prophets. The prophets are the ones who remind us again and again and again and again a word that we have heard before — but a word that we have forgotten or ignored, or maybe just never believed and therefore failed to trust, or maybe we just thought it wasn’t important.

The prophets are sent to remind us that we should not confuse God’s compassion with compromise.<sup>2</sup> They tell us that we cannot afford to be casual about things that God is not casual about.

The word to Jeremiah is that he was appointed to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and plant. There would be building and planting, but only after destruction. Why? Because God’s people have gotten their priorities all out of whack.

Increasingly, this makes sense to me. Maybe it is my age, but it has been my experience that I have a propensity to mess things up — even, maybe particularly, the things I care the most about.

Frances Spufford says it this way: “Wherever the line is drawn between good and evil, between acceptable and unacceptable, between kind and cruel, between clean and dirty, we’re always going to be [walking] on both sides of [that line]<sup>3</sup> — and not just by accident. As Spufford says, “It’s our active inclination to break stuff, including moods, promises, relationships we care about and our own well-being.”<sup>4</sup>

I told you this summer about the conversation Carol and I had early in our marriage. We lived in this chopped-up little rental house. Most of our furniture came from a collection of attics, some of it chosen, some of it cast off from friends. It was our first home and we loved it.

I came home after an evening meeting, and Carol had been hard at work in our little den trying to make it homey. Carol bought some fabric — not enough for curtains; we couldn’t afford that much fabric. She bought just enough to do a “swag.” She was experimenting; that’s what she said. On the corner of each window she had tied the fabric in a different fashion. Each corner looked a little different from the others, and she asked me which one I liked the best.

Here’s where I got confused because when she asked me which one I liked the best, I thought she was asking me which

one I liked the best. And I liked the wrong one.

Now you don't need to know all the details of this conversation — although I could provide them without notes. Suffice it to say, it was a conversation that left us both a bit injured. The amazing thing about this is for years that conversation would rise up in the midst of other conversations that had nothing to do with curtains.

We all have a propensity to mess things up — even those things we love the most.

So this is true: We need grace. We need forgiveness. We can't make it without forgiveness. But that is not all we need. We also need a prophet. We need someone to remind us over and over and over again what is right and true and ultimately important.

When the prophets tell that truth, it comes to us as judgment. Judgment is a tricky thing. We think of judgment as some kind of holy "Go to your room!" We have been bad. We got caught. God's going to get you. But it's not this way. More often, judgment is the fruit that results from unfaithfulness.

Judgment is like visiting your doctor. You feel great, but he draws blood, and he listens here and there. He pokes a bit. And then he says, "OK, Tom, your weight is supposed to be here and it's here. Your cholesterol is supposed to be here and it's there. Your blood pressure is ... well, you know. Says here the last time you exercised was 1985. You still think Pop-Tarts are food?" Stop! That's judgment.

Now you understand the doctor doesn't give you those conditions; they are already there. It's who we are. The doctor just tells us the state of our health and the consequences that can result. In this sense, judgment is not a consequence that is introduced from another place or authority. It's just what happens when we are spiritually unhealthy.

With God, judgment happens because love demands it — which is why there is a long list of prophets. You will remember many of them. There was Elijah and Elisha. Nathan was a prophet to King David, speaking judgment on his affair with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband.

Amos said, "Let justice roll down like waters," condemning the lack of care for the poor.

Hosea speaks of Israel as an "unfaithful spouse," but then describes God as Israel's mother: "It was I who taught Israel to walk."

Isaiah said, "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."

Ezekiel saw a people so spiritually dead, they were like a valley of dry bones.

There was Haggai and Zephaniah, Habbakuk and Zechariah, Malachi and Micah and Obadiah. And they don't stop with the ones written in the book. You have probably had people in your life who have spoken a word that reminded you how out of whack your priorities had become. I have known those prophets.

I didn't really get it until recently, but the fact that the prophets just keep on coming is a sign of God's undying love.

To take the story from last week, the prophets keep coming to tell us we can't play in the street and survive. There is no life out there, stay in the yard, don't play in the street.

God sends the prophets again and again and again, and God still sends them because the love of God is persistent.

I suppose God could say, "That's it. I've had enough. I have been speaking this word to them from the days of Abraham, and still they are casual about the things that truly matter. I'm done." I suppose God could say that.

But the love of God is persistent and does not stop. So God keeps sending prophets. As far as prophets go, it looks like this is never going to stop. So maybe we need to pay more attention.

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<sup>1</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves*, p. 53

<sup>2</sup>Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (1962), p. 17

<sup>3</sup>Frances Spufford, *Unapologetic* (2012), p. 33

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: [www.villagepres.org/sermons](http://www.villagepres.org/sermons).