

Toward a Theology of Leadership: Some Clues from the Prophets

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One of the things that impresses itself upon me more and more as I read and study the Scriptures is the extent to which they address and speak about the nature and character of leadership. By story, example, instruction, prayer, law and prophetic oracle, the Bible frequently sets before us a focus on the responsibilities, characteristics and demands incumbent upon those who are called or chosen to lead the people of God. That Scriptural concern needs always to be lifted up, for it resonates with the continuing need of the church and society to think about what is needed in its leaders and to choose or call them on that basis.

I would like, therefore, to uncover some of that scriptural direction that can help us achieve a theological understanding of leadership, turning particularly to the prophets. In focusing upon them, I do not want to suggest that the ministry, which is the position of leadership that I have most in mind, is simply equatable with biblical prophecy. They are in many ways very different. Nor do we naturally use the term leadership in connection with the prophetic figures, who often are isolated individuals, rejected by the community and in conflict with it. But the Church has always recognized that in the work of the ancient prophets it discerns something of the task of its leaders, even if it does not always look favorably upon those who carry out the tasks along prophetic lines. And in the Book of Deuteronomy, the prophet is one of the four institutional figures of leadership that is provided for or constituted in the Deuteronomistic code.

I will not try to be exhaustive, but rather set forth a basic assumption and then point to four stories in the prophetic traditions that suggest some of the dimensions that may be involved in leading the community of faith. The *assumption* is simply that the primary or fundamental connection between the office of minister and the office of prophet is in the shared experience and reality of God's *call*: that

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powerful grasp upon one's life that gives vocation, even—and indeed often—when it is not sought, even when it means letting go of vocations and tasks that one had already assumed in order to take up the work of God and the leadership of God's people, and even though such responsibility may be difficult, unrewarding and not at all where one necessarily wants to be. I turn to the prophetic stories, therefore, because from them we get some clues, whether desirable or not, about what it means to live under God's call.

One of the things that is interesting about these four stories is that they are more private than public. They are not stories of great public proclamations by the prophet. We tend to see the prophets as preachers to the congregation of Israel, and clearly that goes on. But the prophetic office is frequently carried out frequently in much more private ways, as a Nathan comes to see a David or an Isaiah is sent by the Lord to meet Ahaz at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field.

AMOS 7:10-17

The first of the stories is the account of the encounter between the prophet Amos and the chief priest of Bethel, Amaziah; one of many texts that presents the prophet as one who acts as *herald* or *messenger* of the Word and rule of God. This story's central thrust is a profound *clash of perspectives* on the part of two leaders of God's people, a prophet and a priest. I find myself again and again returning to this story, in large part because I am forced to ask myself which role and which perspective mirrors my own.

Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, "'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from its land.'"

And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I was a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'

Now, therefore, hear the word of the Lord: You say, "'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.' Therefore, thus says the Lord: 'Your wife shall be a harlot in the city, And your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.'"

The clash of perspectives is between one leader wedded to the national state—the established political order—and another leader whose point of refer-

ence is the covenant people. While Amaziah is the chief priest of the kingdom, located at the national church, his chief concern is not the worship and will of the Lord, but rather the preservation of the throne and the nation. The human ruler, not the divine ruler, is his touchstone. Amos's word from the Lord is thus perceived as a conspiracy and threat to the king rather than as a word of divine judgment. In Amaziah's concern for protecting the ruler and the state, he "de-theologizes" Amos's words. It is "thus says Amos" not "thus says the Lord." The "house" of Israel, not "my people" Israel is the frame of reference of this religious leader. So the ministerial leadership of Israel has become an establishment of the state whose primary concern is not to rock the boat. The temple of the Lord has become the temple of the kingdom, a royal chapel, not the dwelling place of the Lord. As King Ahab failed to see that his designation of Elijah as "troubler of Israel" was more appropriately an interpretation of his own role, so Amaziah has failed to see that the one who is disturbing the peace and threatening the future of the kingdom is the king and not the prophet of God.

So the text sets before us these two perspectives on the part of two people, both of whom have responsibilities of different sorts for the leadership of the community of faith. And I am forced to ask, am I best reflected in the one who represents the status quo of the establishment of wealth and power rather than the reign of God? Do I perceive who my people are? Are they a people called to live in covenant with God, or are they the leaders in the community? Both things may be true, but one of these perspectives should be the controlling one. Do I perceive myself as *hired*—eating my bread or making my living as a minister, teacher—or do I perceive myself as *called*, not only by a community but by the impetus of God?

There are, of course, all sorts of complexities to our existence as ministers and leaders in circumstances very different from one another, much less from Amos. But such complexities ought not to blur the continuing question as to whether we know ourselves to be heralds and messengers of the Word of God to such an extent that we do not forget who we are and lose ourselves in service to another rule than that which has called us. The issue of leadership raised by this story is not one of effectiveness but of *perspective* and the subtle allure of other powers that would claim our attention and energies.

2 KINGS 5:1-19¹

It is not customary for most of us to think of a prophet as a pastor or shepherd. On the contrary, we usually think of the prophet and the pastor as being two very different types of people; of the prophetic role as being sharply distinguished from the pastoral role. Whether ancient or modern, the prophet is the preacher, the herald of God's Word, not the shepherd, who comes and goes with a word and presence of healing and renewal. Anyone who has tried at any time to serve as minister to a congregation knows the frustrating and tearing experience of trying to be both a prophet who brings the word of God with power and the pastor who brings the power of God in a word. All of us know of instances where a minister has been criticized for fulfilling her prophetic role but neglecting her

pastoral role. Sometimes one feels that the neglect of the one is regarded as an automatic consequence of fulfilling the other. The roles seem incompatible. It is not generally the best pastoral practice to address the women of your congregation as "fat cows of Bashan" or to attack them as unrelentingly as Amos did. Indeed, the prophetic role, as we see it in Scripture, often seems quite incompatible with the best insights of clinical pastoral studies that help us see the pain that sometimes lies behind the actions of persons and groups or the sociological insights that uncover the social constraints that affect our actions.

Yet the leader of God's people is called to be a prophet when it is necessary and a pastor when it is necessary, a comforter and discomforter, one who challenges who and what we are and one who seeks to understand what is going on within us. And I would like to resist the apparent incompatibility of these roles. If the prophet is an interpreter of what is going on, in the light of God's Word, then it is possible that the bringing of that word and the understanding of the human situation and the dynamics at play do not have to be set off from each other. That does not mean that the interpretation will always be well accepted. Sometimes awareness of the dynamics compels an interpretation that is not welcome.

The story of Elisha and the king of Syria illustrates the capacity of the prophet to be a pastor. On the surface, a very unlikely candidate for such a role is that strange character who pronounced bloody doom on the house of Jehu, made axe-heads float on water and caused bears to attack little boys who bothered him. But this story, which is preceded by one in which he heals a sick child, is an account of Elisha's acting as a pastor to one in sickness and need: Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, who was afflicted with leprosy.

This prophet performed spectacular miracles and was a most unusual person insofar as we know his story, yet it is the mystery and simplicity of God's action in his life that stands out in bold relief. It is God at work here, as we see from Naaman's later confession of faith. But the way in which God works through his prophet is so strange yet so simple that Naaman cannot really believe it. The message from Elisha is simply this: "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times." It is so easy that Naaman is furious and refuses to go, claiming if that was all it took, he could have done that in one of the fine rivers of Damascus. Naaman must have wanted some sort of ritual or elaborate service. He at least expected Elisha to call on the name of the Lord. Both the king of Israel and Naaman make a great deal about the whole affair, whereas Elisha says simply: "Go and wash." Finally, Naaman agrees and does as he is told. And his leprosy is healed. Then he realizes that, all his expectations to the contrary, God has worked in a strange and simple way through a little slave girl and a prophet's brief command.

It is, however, in the closing conversation between Naaman and Elisha that the prophet gives true pastoral guidance. Naaman vows never again to sacrifice to any God but the Lord. But he says these words to the prophet: "But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon

your servant on this one count" (v.18). To which Elisha replies simply: "Go in peace."

You will understand when I nominate—half-facetiously, half seriously—Elisha as the first non-directive counselor. He does not rebuke Naaman for saying he will bow down in the house of other gods. Nor does he really say that it is acceptable. Only this, he says: "Go in peace." That is, go in God's peace, for God understands.

A possible violation of the First Commandment is at stake here, for Naaman recognizes pragmatically that when he goes home—as a commander of the king of Syria's army—he cannot get entirely away from the worship of foreign gods. But Naaman has to decide, and Elisha leaves him free to do so. He does not call down the First Commandment against him. In fact, strangely enough (for the way in which we often regard the Old Testament) Naaman is given no rules or laws—only the terrible, freeing word of grace: Go in peace. In this story, the prophet has acted as the Lord's representative. That role is never relinquished. But his dealing with this person is in the light of the human realities, the restrictions and constraints that are present in every human situation. It is not, in fact, a direct word of the Lord that Elisha ever gives. It is the word that is needful for healing and for enabling the one who has to carry on in the difficult circumstances that inevitably lie ahead. Its chief ingredient is what belongs always to acts of shepherding and pastoral care: the bringing to awareness of the reality of the grace of God that surrounds us and sustains us.

And that is all that needs to be heard in this passage—except for the matter of Naaman's load of dirt. Dirt from Israel that he could take back to Syria and use for a place of sacrifice to the Lord. Naaman's request—peculiar though it may have been—is most meaningful. For in this earth he saw a sacramental character, a token of God's presence even where that would seem not to be the case—a sign like that of which Isaiah spoke a century later: the sign of Immanuel—God with us.

EZEKIEL 33:7-9

So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

Here is a quite different testimony to the pastoral role of the prophet and the way in which the two come together but not easily. The text has to do with the prophet's responsibility for the welfare of others, for bringing the word of the

Lord and interpreting the human situation so that persons can know what is going on and what God expects of them. The image of the prophet as sentry, at its basic level, has to do with *pastoral care*. The warning of the prophet is not simply a trumpet blast through the countryside or a sermon addressed to the community of Israel. The warning is to be given to each individual. It is not simply a general word to the people but an encounter with individual members of the congregation that is meant to lead them to see the shift of life that is required when one has failed to live according to the Lord's direction. We are accustomed to thinking of the prophetic task as confined to the act of preaching and social action. Ezekiel's call turns that task into one of shepherding and pastoral care—of the most difficult sort. And it does so in a very ungentle fashion. The prophet is held accountable for failure to appeal to the individual members, to instruct and warn them about the consequences of their actions. The word of preaching goes forth, but it must be followed by individual attention, especially to those members of the flock who have offended or in some fashion turned away.

1 KINGS 19:9-18

The final story is the familiar one of Elijah at Mount Horeb after the conflict with the prophets of Baal at Carmel. Having heard the threat of Jezebel to take his life—and with dispatch—he has fled in fear and weariness and given up.

The story of Elijah on Mount Horeb/Sinai is a narrative counter to the story of his stand against the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. There, in defiance of the widespread apostasy of the people, the hostile and apostate King Ahab, the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, Elijah declared, "I, even I only, am left" and challenged the prophets to evoke the power of *their god* as he knew *the Lord* would respond to his prayers. In chap. 19 Elijah utters the same words, "I, even I only, am left," twice at Horeb. Only now they are no longer the words of a brave prophet trusting in the power of the Lord against great odds, they are an expression of lonely fear before the threat of a single but powerful individual, Queen Jezebel. The prophetic public declaration of obedience has now turned into an inner doubt, depression and despair. The one who has stood tall has now become afraid and self-pitying.

The familiar part of this passage is vv. 12-13, the report of the apparent theophany of wind, earthquake and fire, followed by the sound of silence and the voice of the Lord that speaks to Elijah as he comes to the cave's entrance. One must be careful not to overplay this part of the story or seek its essential meaning in these verses. They are part of a larger whole whose center is the dialogue between the Lord and Elijah. The theophanic elements are, in this case, a counter to what they have meant in the past. If Elijah is in some fashion identified with Moses, he is not a repeat performance. The natural paraphernalia of revelation, whether of Baal or the Lord, do not serve that purpose in this case. Nor does the Lord deal with this inner and personal struggle of faith as with the previous public conflict of faith in Chapter 18. The Lord sent the fire, then—but not this time. For the one who has been chosen and commissioned, who has been the obedient agent of the Lord's power in the past, the fireworks of theophany are not the vehicle of the

Lord's dealing. One is reminded of Jeremiah's complaints and the Lord's response to him to get back in the fray. In the face of Elijah's fear and depression, neither a revelatory sound and light show nor a therapeutic counseling program are what is given.

Instead, the fear and doubt of the prophet evoke a simple and direct challenge and a renewal of his call, a re-call to his task as a prophet. This is as direct a word to the obedient and now doubting prophet as was his word and the fire to the people at Mount Carmel. The Lord's question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" is an example of what we find not infrequently in Scripture, a divine questioning that is an implicit critique of choices that have been made, directions taken. The aroused fears of Elijah are real. He is in danger, and he is not given spectacular reassurance. But neither is the Lord's agent allowed to wallow in self-pity easily or to give up his vocation. The divine call continues, the prophetic burden is to be borne. In a fashion that cuts against the grain of our modern ethos, depression, despair and self-pity are not ways of avoiding the service of the Lord.

There is, of course, a kind of therapy for this burned-out prophet, though perhaps not therapy in the way we usually use the term. It is in the divine instruction to get back to work. We know nothing of the restoration of Elijah's spirits, only of his resumption of the prophetic task: "Go...so he set out." It is a familiar model of the divine word and response. And it is an essential lesson of the text. Further, there is a kind of assurance given. For despite his sense of lonely obedience, Elijah is not, any more than we ever are, alone. There are seven thousand in Israel who also remain obedient to the Lord, and it is with those faithful ones who also struggle to remain obedient and to seek the way of the Lord that the prophet of God may now join hands in the difficult and unpleasant times that lie ahead.

In sum, then, I have identified some clues from the prophets about the prophetic ministry and the leadership of the people that such ministry carries with it. The examples and what they intimate are not exhaustive. In one case the issue of leadership is not, as it is often assumed to be, one of effectiveness or other skills, but *perspective*, how one sees and is oriented. In another instance the story suggested that there is a bridge between prophetic and pastoral leadership, not a necessary dichotomy, that it is possible to take account of the pain in interpreting the human situation, that the prophet knows to speak the word of grace and freedom to those who are caught and seeking ways out that can be faithful, and that the prophetic bearing of the word of God may take place in the most intimate and private encounters between minister and another. This type of leader does not hold back from difficult things that need to be said, but addresses particularly those persons who also bear responsibility for leadership in the community. The prophet is in some sense peculiarly the pastor/prophet to *other leaders* of the community and, if Ezekiel is any clue, is responsible for the outcome according to whether or not he or she has been faithful in that pastoral/prophetic role.

Finally, it seems to me that Elijah's experience is a particular indication of the necessity in the prophetic ministry for being and keeping faithful, not only when filled with the zeal of the Lord of Hosts, but when one is fed up, under attack, alone

and in the depths, when faith is low and the darkness is all around. I do not believe this is easy, but I believe God expects it. Perhaps, in our study of the Word of God, it would be worth reading, from time to time, about Elijah's failed retreat. In those times when the call is muted or the spirit weak, it may help to remind us that the call is still there, but so also is God's sustaining grace.

Notes

1. This interpretation of 2 Kings 5 is indebted to the brief but thoughtful reading of it by Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), 2:30-32.

