

Have You Experienced This Prophetic Pain?

Because I live in two nations, I get to be part of two local churches, one in Manila and one in Nashville. For obvious reasons, Victory Manila is 99 percent Filipino. For reasons that are not as obvious, Bethel is approximately 55 percent black (African American and African immigrants), 35 percent white, and 10 percent other (Asian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern). This means that I am an ethnic minority in both of my home churches. This also means that there are worship styles, communication styles and hairstyles that I simply do not understand (and probably never will).

In the past year, I have had multiple conversations with black and white members of my Nashville church. Sometimes, my black friends feel like certain topics are not addressed enough, while some of my white friends feel like those same topics are addressed too much. In a multiethnic church, it seems that when certain sensitive topics are addressed, no one is fully satisfied. This is what I call “the pain of prophetic preaching.” And this pain is not unique to my multiethnic home church in Nashville.

If you have an honest conversation with multiethnic church members in London, Johannesburg or Singapore, while the specific details might be different, the sentiments will probably be the same. Some want certain topics to be hit harder and more often from the pulpit, while others prefer those same topics to be discussed privately or not at all.

Oh the pain of prophetic preaching. What’s a preacher to do? If anyone ever lived with the pain of prophetic preaching, it was Jeremiah.

He was born a priest, but before he was born, God decided he

would be a prophet (see Jeremiah 1:1-10). I bet there were many times Jeremiah wished he could have lived the relatively uncomplicated and uncontroversial life of a priest.

But no, God called him to be a prophet, and that meant he had to preach uncomfortable topics like idolatry, adultery, immigration (sojourners), religious pluralism, colonialism, racism, the shedding of innocent blood, orphan care, government corruption and poverty, to name a few. It is common today for people to think that faithful obedience to God results in prosperity and popularity. Not so for Jeremiah. His faithful obedience resulted in unjust incarceration more than once. It also led to brutal beatings and death threats. Because Jeremiah was faithful to his prophetic call, he was neither popular nor prosperous. He was hated and despised by the very people he served.

After a season of preaching prophetic sermons that no one except God wanted him to preach, Jeremiah let out a brutally honest and desperate prayer (aka a prophetic complaint). “Woe is me, my mother, that you have borne me as a man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth! I have not lent with usury, nor have men lent to me on usury, yet every one of them curses me” (Jer. 15:10).

You know it’s bad when a preacher brings his mother into a conversation with God!

Notice that Jeremiah described himself as a man of strife and contention to the whole land. That’s pretty bleak, but it gets worse. He notes that, unlike a banker, he neither lends nor borrows, yet all of them curse me. I doubt that every single person actually cursed him, but on some days, it seems that way when God calls you to be a prophetic preacher. Jeremiah discovered that being a faithful prophetic preacher can sometimes destroy relationships and increase stress.

How did God respond to Jeremiah’s complaint, and how might He

respond to ours? God responded with a rhetorical question: “Have I not set you free for their good?” (Jer. 15:11, ESV)

God’s response contains two important reminders for everyone whose calling causes them to be unpopular. First, the call of God sets us free from the concerns and temporal value systems of the prevailing culture. Second, the call of God is for the good of others, not necessarily for our immediate good.

While most preachers reading this blog will not experience Jeremiah’s level of persecution, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that even modern prophetic preachers should expect some level of opposition because “the prophetic act, now as always, is decidedly upstream and against the grain.” (If you’d like to read more on this, check out Brueggemann’s book, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word*.) That “decidedly upstream and against the grain” phrase sure explains the difficulty of preaching certain topics. But faithfulness to the call demands that we preach them anyway.

Question: Does faithfulness to God’s calling always guarantee immediate earthly blessings?

Answer: No, but it always honors God and always produces eternal rewards.

Therefore, I suggest that preachers boldly and wisely preach whatever God says to preach, especially if it is “decidedly upstream” and against the prevailing cultural current. {eo}

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