

Who Says God Says?

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"...never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." Amos 7:13

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Luke 4:21

Within the last couple of years we have had a guest at Christ Community; his name is Niko Terlinda. He is a pastor in Amsterdam. He has an exciting ministry there. He told of his experience of teaching the Bible at the public school. Strangely enough, with the secularizing of that country that was so deeply imbued in the Christian tradition, a minister like Terlinda would go to a public school and tell Bible stories, not in order to evangelize the children, but simply to keep the knowledge of the Biblical tradition alive. He tells about the day he told the story of how God spoke to Amos, when a little nine-year-old raised his hand and said, "Does God still say something?" As Terlinda noted to us, and as we so note this morning, that really is a critical question. Does God still say something?

When I came out of seminary in 1960, within a year or two a friend of mine was called to a sister congregation in the area and I was invited to preach the ordination sermon. I took a text from one of the prophets. I am not sure just which one. I can't remember the text, but I remember the sermon very, very well, and I remember the point of the sermon. I said to this person about to assume a ministry of the Word of God that, in the case of Jeremiah, the biblical prophet, Jeremiah could say, "Thus saith the Lord." But I said to my friend on the threshold of being ordained into the ministry of the Word, "You can't say that. What you must say is, 'Thus hath the Lord said.'" Do you get the difference?

At that time, in the days of my youth, and days of my insecurity and defensiveness, which I didn't really understand, I wanted every word that God had ever spoken to be in this book. I wanted to have between the covers of this book every revealed word, and it would be then from that mind that I would have the Word, it would be given here, I could manage it, and I could proclaim it. I said to my friend, "The biblical prophet said, 'Thus saith the Lord,' but you will be able to say only, 'Thus hath the Lord said.'" I was dead wrong. Somebody should have come up and taken me by the ear and brought me home. Someone should have

said to me, "Do you know what you have just done to this young minister? You have absolutely shackled him. You have ruled out the possibility that God still speaks. You have ruled out the possibility that there could still be today the immediacy of God's address of God's people through the proclaimed word."

Or in answer to the question of the little nine-year-old – "Does God still say something?" – what I was saying in that message was, "No. God has spoken. God speaks no more!" We have now to proclaim what once came to expression, but there was always that indirectness, this truth at second hand. That was safe, and it was manageable. But it was absolutely wrong. I don't know how long it took me to figure that out. Thank God I realized at some point that God still speaks. While this Word is a record of that encounter of God with God's people in the past, and it becomes still the instrument through which God addresses God's people in the present, it is the address of God's people in the present about which we are concerned. We would hear the Word of God now, here and now, addressed to our lives and our situation. But the moment one would make that claim someone is going to say, "Who Says God Says?"

I suppose that could be your question. As I preach, you are responsible people, thinking people, serious people. Sometimes I suppose the question must arise over against what I am proclaiming: "Who Says God Says?" You know really the idea of preaching, the conception of preaching in the Reformed tradition, is a presumptuous idea. Calvin and Luther said that the proclaimed word becomes the Word of God. In our tradition there is the Word of God written, the Word of God in flesh, but also the preached Word. That is why the Word has been so central. The proclaimed Word, the Word of God – that almost smacks of arrogance to me. This Word, the Word of God – did you ever say, "Who Said God Says?" Do you ever challenge that preached word? I suspect you do. I hope you do. I think you ought to, because, as a matter of fact, I stand in the tradition of Amos, and for that matter of Jesus.

Amos was a farmer, but he got a call one day and he went to the Northern Kingdom of Israel and to the very royal court itself, and he proclaimed the word of judgment against that Northern Kingdom and against Jeroboam the king to the point at which the royal priest – (because every court also had its cadre of priests because every wise political leader will do his or her best to co-opt the Church, the messenger of God, so that there can be the union of throne and altar) – Uzziah, the court priest, came out to this prickly prophet and said, "Go back home. Earn your bread in Judah, but don't preach here any more." Well, Amos said, "Don't call me a professional prophet who earns his bread preaching. I'm just a farmer. God took me, called me, and sent me to preach."

But the dilemma. Amos, a man of passion and conviction. Without that no one listens. Nothing happens. But Uzziah, he had his ordination too. He was a priest. Maybe he was in it just for the prestige and the pay, or maybe he was a serious priest of the God of Israel. I don't know, but I know he had a task to do too. As

one who presided at the royal court, he encounters a prophet. This is not the only instance of that conflict in Israel's history where the prophetic word was expressed and the royal response countered it, and I suppose a case could be made for Uzziah. Israel was at the height of its prosperity and who likes to have a dour word, a negative word of judgment and critique spoken in the halls of power where they are trying to keep everything moving positively. Jesus - if you had been in Nazareth that day and Jesus whom you saw grow up went to the pulpit and then came to the stool and sat down and said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. God has anointed me to... and to say this word has been fulfilled in your presence." What would you have thought? You see, it's not so difficult to look back on Israel's history in the 8th century BCE and to analyze the conflict between Amos and Uzziah and say obviously Amos had a word from God (and as a matter of fact, that word did eventuate).

It's not so difficult for us who are the followers of Jesus to say the people in Jesus' home synagogue in Nazareth were absolutely wrong. Not that they didn't understand; the problem is they didn't like what they understood. So, if you don't like the message, you kill the messenger. But, it wasn't so easy. They didn't really have any basis on which to judge this one except he'd grown up in the corner carpenter shop and they had heard some rumors about what he was doing in Capernaum and neighboring areas. Some of the things he was doing were unsettling. Then he has the audacity to sit in their midst in the synagogue and to say, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. I am anointed to preach." Would you have been ready to hear that word, which would have involved the tumbling of the propositions of one's system of understanding? Or might you have gone to the parlor and had brunch and said, "I don't know. 'Who Says God Says?'"

Who Says God Says? That's not so easy, is it? That's not so easy for you because you have to live with me. You know all the foibles and flaws of this preacher. Then for twenty minutes on a given Sunday I sit on this stool and I say, "Thus saith the Lord." Well, you're not just subservient puppets that you should just sit there and take it. Discern, test the spirits. But it's not so easy for me either. How do I know? I know this. With the little bit I do know I begin to know how little I know. Then I am supposed to say to you, God's people, "Thus saith the Lord." That's scary business. That's why I get a headache on Saturday. (Laughter) A headache before and then one on Sunday afternoon after. Someone said to me this week, "If I had your job I'd have a headache too."

Who Says God Says? How in the world do we know? If there isn't passion and conviction on the part of the messenger, the message will not be heeded. But if there is a kind of absolutism and dogmatism, and authoritarianism in the message, the message very naturally is going to be resisted, and rightly so. Who Says God Says? It isn't simple. And I am not going to turn now to the typical preacher's trick of giving you six easy ways by which to know. My point is: It is not that easy. It is not that simple.

I did talk to a friend of mine yesterday who gave me some help in order that I could say something that maybe you could go out of here thinking about. He was recently in England and Scotland and Ireland, and on the trip back from Ireland to England they came into the harbor of Holy Head in Wales. It reminded him of a story of an old preacher who had come into Holy Head Harbor in the dead of night and the darkness was so thick that you could cut it with a knife. This preacher said to the captain, "How in the world do you know that you are going to sail into the harbor?" The captain said to him, "Do you see those three lights on the horizon?" He said, "Yes." He said, "When those three lights line up as one you will sail into the middle of Holy Head Harbor."

If we apply this, we could say on one hand there is that light of the tradition. We are a people who have been shaped. We have come from a womb that has shaped us and has implanted deeply within us, woven into the fabric of our being, certain perceptions, a certain frame of reference, a sense of being. We do not disparage that rock from which we have been hewn. We have a tradition. We are the recipients of a great heritage, and that tradition has been written of, spoken of as scriptures, and we have two thousand years of church history. We are Christians. We are part of the God of Israel. Going back to the creation, we are a people who believe in that one who created all things and who was revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. We come out of a community that has spoken, that has affirmed some things. So we do have some guidelines. We don't start out from square one, with a blank slate as it were. But that one light isn't enough because it can then simply be an external rule to which one would assent mentally but without inward conviction. That inward conviction must also be there. How does that inward conviction develop? What do you *really* believe? What do you really *believe*? What would make you stand on your feet and be counted? What would fill you with rage causing you to move into action? What would break your heart and cause compassion to flow? What do you really believe?

I speak of *my* concrete truth. It's one thing for me to say I am a part of this grand tradition. It's another thing for me to say, "This I believe. This I will die for. This I will live for." How does that come? Out of our experience? I suppose. Out of the ongoing communion of the Spirit? God is not done speaking. God says something still. Jesus said, "The Spirit will lead you into all truth." Calvin said, "The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit must confirm what the word or the tradition says to us." Somehow or other those things come together until finally I can take my stand. I can say, "I believe." So that is a second light.

Then, of course, the tradition has not issued to us in our present experience in a vacuum. We live in a cultural context in a specific historical setting. As we said last week, it's a fascinating time in which to be alive – the knowledge that is exploding all around us, the fantastic knowledge of the physical universe, of the human person, of the movement of history, all of this that becomes accessible to us so that in our own experience tried and true physical theories like that of Newton are blown sky high. And instead we have quantum physics. We live in a

cultural context that is alive with all kinds of knowledge that give us new insight. So I have to take that which shaped me and that tradition in which I was nurtured, and my experience...my experience of grace...of God...of my human experience. Then I have to understand myself in this present time, this ongoing human drama...my time. So our specific time, context, the influence of our culture is a third light. But it is still not simple.

The Church historically has majored in absolutes. Some of the greatest problems in the Church are the preachers who want to make it clear and simple, and who need to be right. But there's a problem in the pew also. The people would like to have it simple and clear and tight. It isn't simple and clear. It is complex, full of ambiguity, and we cannot know. We cannot know absolutely. To know absolutely is to deny the nature of our historical existence. And I don't think the Church over the centuries has done a favor to people to try to give that kind of security that will remove all uneasiness and ambiguity from the human situation. In the ongoing movement of the human drama we need to be open and alive and alert and humble, and trusting that the Spirit of God will lead us into all truth, and that underneath are everlasting arms and that God will move and that God's purposes will be in ways beyond our wildest dreams. But the secret of that is not knowing, but trusting. To be able to live with questions, all the time trusting the eternal God who is the foundation, the God who holds the world in God's hand knowing that there are yet more wonders to behold and dreams to dream and insights to gain than have ever entered into the human heart. "We walk," said Paul, "not by knowledge but by faith." For he said, "It has not entered into the heart of man to dream the things that God has prepared for those that love God." When we walk by faith, when we trust God, then we can be open to the continuing surprises of grace and the "aha!"

The Church still today, maybe today more than ever, is making all kinds of absolute statements. In order to increase summer attendance we decided to add a Sunday supplement to the bulletin. You've now got a comic strip. I would have mentioned it earlier, but I didn't want to lose your attention. (Laughter) The little comic strip on the last page would be funny if it weren't true. People like me have stood before people like you and have said, "It is abundantly clear that..." and it's not. And you don't need to have it so clear, and so neat, all tied up in a little package. One thing you need: to trust God. Trust God. People like me have pandered to people like you, succumbed to the seduction of trying to be the font of all knowledge and wisdom. Giving you answers where there were really only questions, when what we should have been saying to you was, "On the one hand, on the other, but nevertheless." The foundation is solid. God is God, and you can trust that!

Well sometime I'll be preaching along and I expect one of you will stand up in the pew and say, "Who Says God Says?" And I'll say, "Time out. You're right," because dear friends I believe with all my heart and I preach with all the passion of my soul, and I know some things. The thing I know more than all is that I don't

know very much when it comes to the real mysteries of life. But I know God will take care of you...come what may.