

Sermon: Concerning the Prophets

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Micah 3:5-12; Matthew 23:1-12**

One thing about Matthew and Micah and all of the other prophets: they don't pull their punches. But today, Matthew and Micah raise issues about prophecy, prophets, scribes, and Pharisees. And when we look at them, we can't help but look at ourselves too.

It's important to note that Jesus and Matthew are dealing with specific scribes and Pharisees; they're not indicting all scribes and all Pharisees across the ages for all time. But we can certainly say that Matthew bears some animosity toward the scribes and Pharisees in his own time, which might reflect a conflict that he and his congregation experienced at the time he was writing, which was about thirty-five years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Pharisees believed that all souls are immortal and that the righteous will rise to eternal life at the end of the age. They taught the existence of angels and spirits, and they believed that everything depends on God and fate, and that doing good was something we must always do. Sounds like Jesus. They also looked at political questions from a religious point of view. This is all standard-issue contemporary Judaism.

There is some speculation among scholars that Jesus himself may have been a Pharisee. If they were peers, that might explain why he was so critical of this group.

For Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees in his day did not practice what they taught. Most likely, Jesus is taking aim at the corruption he sees in the Temple, and this relates back to flipping the money changers' tables and to criticizing the company the Pharisees had been keeping lately – the Herodians and their Roman coins, for example.

It is odd, then, that Jesus would tell his disciples to do whatever the Pharisees taught. It could be he's giving honor to their office before he rips them apart rhetorically.

Then there is Micah. Like most prophets, he is not happy. It's a lonely call, being a prophet. They tend to be outsiders, belonging to no one group. They stand on

the margins of society, which makes sense when we consider that they are most often critical of government and the culture around them. They are, however, always advocates for justice. Micah opposed any and all institutions that had forgotten their reason for being and had become instead ‘empty shells.’

He preached against corrupt judges and religious leaders in general, and today – thus says the Lord – he warns that with its corrupt leadership, Jerusalem is doomed. He pleads for justice on behalf of his exploited people. He has no use for prophets and priests for whom the allure of money speaks louder than God. Those who fail to listen to YHWH will soon not hear the Lord’s voice at all.

Micah is angry and he knows he’s right. As far as he is concerned, only the prophets who lead the people rightly can expect an answer from God. For false prophets, it shall always be a night without *vision*, and a spiritual darkness with no *revelation*.

In our current, long-running election season, we have been very nearly pummeled flat with promises, dire warnings, and sketchy explanations. As of October 26, 1,224 candidates have filed with the Federal Election Commission to run for president.¹ These candidates represent 46 different political parties, not counting the Unaffiliated, Nonpartisan, and Other candidates.

So many candidates – what would motivate them all to run? A love of titles? Of glory? Or is the attention that comes to those who throw their hat in the ring all that matters? They can’t all be serious, but apparently, they all have something to say.

With all these competing messages and visions offered by each of these people, how do we know what’s true, what is truth, and what is simply and plainly false? They all seem to be saying a version of, ‘The Lord is with us!’ But how is that possible?

The Massachusetts ballot includes two referendum questions. It took us at least a half hour to work our way through just the first question before we thought we knew what it was about, and that was just to gain understanding without knowing how we might vote on it. As it is, both sides have a good argument but one of them has to lose.

What we can learn from Micah and Matthew is that false prophecy is not always clearly distinguishable from true prophecy. You have to listen carefully and decide for yourself what is true and what is truth.

How *do* we tell a false prophet from another, truer, prophet? Micah wasn't always right, and he is considered a true prophet. By the same token, no false prophets ever got their own book in the Bible. When Micah was wrong, or mostly not right, it was said that his words were true but God's mind was changed, and we have seen this happen before as with Nineveh.

Are Micah's false prophets – and the scribes and Pharisees, for that matter – maliciously false? Or are they simply wrong or misguided? They obviously think they are in the right, or maybe they intended to mislead. As a group, they practice what they consider to be True, but which may not be the Truth.

A German Bible scholar named Hans Walter Wolff identified five criteria for true prophecy. Some are easier to prove than others. He wrote: a true prophet confronts sin and pronounces God's judgement on it; a true prophet speaks only when prompted to by God; a true prophet delivers the message as-is without tailoring or editing it to suit the audience; a true prophet is ethically beyond reproach; and a true prophet is sent by God.²

There have always been competing visions of God's word, and God knows, humans are competitive. Prophetic conflict was reported in the Bible in many places. Trying to understand God's will and getting it right the first time is a most difficult endeavor, but we keep at it because we want to know; we *need* to know.

The word *pharisee* means 'the Separated,' but from what? No one knows, really. Separated from uncleanness, perhaps, or maybe from people. Maybe in Matthew's time, they were just going through the motions or, worse, their true interest lay in protecting their own situations.

Maybe what this conflict is, is a warning shot for us to not fall into the same behaviors. Maybe Jesus and Matthew are saying, "Look, don't be like the scribes and Pharisees; forget about high status; lose the false piety; don't seek public attention simply for doing your job; instead, just do your job."

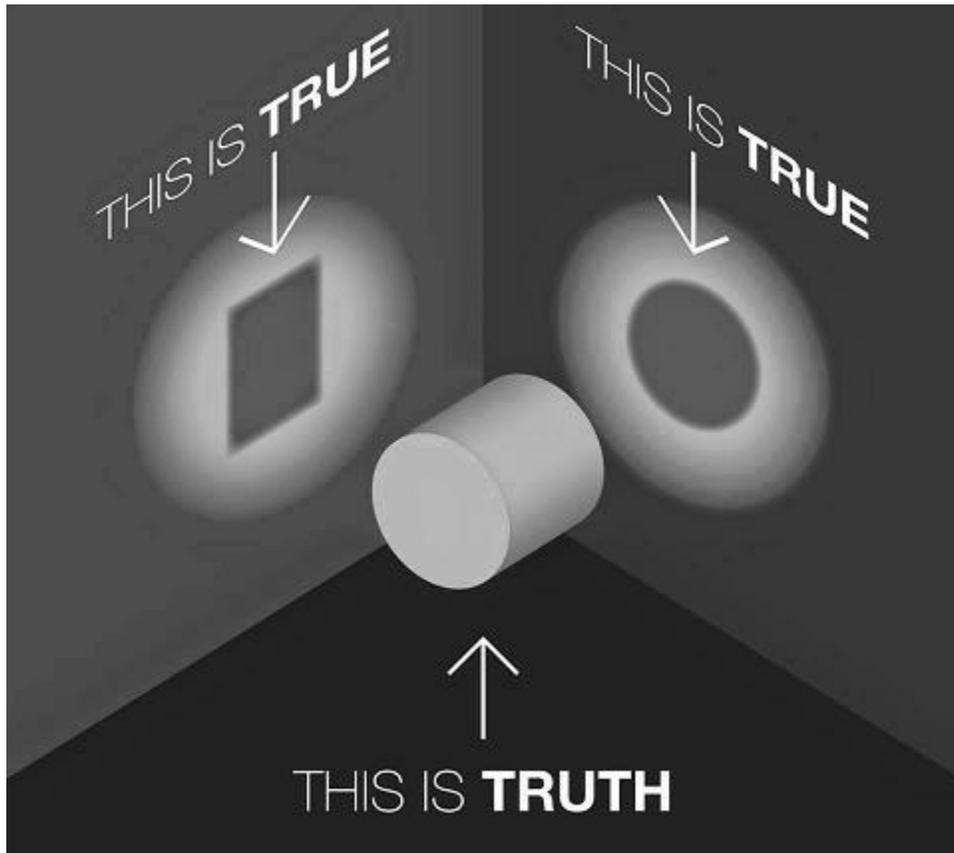
Scripture tells us that prophecy connects God's will with what is going on in the community and with each individual. Prophecy tests the signs of the times and helps us decide what needs to be done now and what can wait. And Scripture teaches that prophecy comes from the Spirit, and that it can come to anyone, from any generation, across all levels of society, even from the margins.

With all that's going on in the world today, it's hard to tell what is true and what is truth, and how to distinguish them from what is completely false. But we are free to decide what is valid according to how we discern God's will, and act accordingly.

Maybe it simply does come down to asking, what would Jesus do?

Amen.

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¹ Including: 325 Democratic candidates; 164 Republican candidates; 65 Libertarian candidates; and 23 Green candidates. https://ballotpedia.org/List_of_registered_2020_presidential_candidates.

² Maclean, Jennifer K Berenson. 2002. "Micah 3:5-12." *Interpretation* 56 (4): 413–16.