Jeremiah 33:14-18 – Advent Week One: Christ the Prophet

As this is the first week of Advent, we are going to put the series on John's Gospel on hold, and start a new Advent series. Advent is all about the anticipation of Christ's coming, both the celebration of his first coming at Christmas, and looking forward to his coming again in glory. As we anticipate the celebration of Christmas, we want to focus on how God was preparing his people for the coming of the Messiah throughout the Old Testament in the prophets, priests, and kings of his people.

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How Jesus is to be understood through the Old Testament is helpfully summarized in HC Q&A 31:

Q. Why is he called "Christ," meaning "anointed"?

A. Because he has been ordained by God the Father and has been anointed with the Holy Spirit,

to be our chief prophet and teacher who fully reveals to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our deliverance;

our only high priest, who has delivered us by the one sacrifice of his body, and who continually pleads our cause with the Father;

and our eternal king who governs us by his Word and Spirit, and who guards us and keeps us in the freedom he has won for us.

The Catechism's summary of who Christ is, and why he has the title 'Christ', explains this with three designations: prophet, priest, and king. Over the next three weeks we will focus on each of these to gain a better understanding of who Jesus is, and why God sent him to us on that first Christmas day so long ago.

Today, we will begin with the first, Christ the Prophet, with the prophet Jeremiah's foretelling of Jesus' coming. In the 33rd chapter of Jeremiah, the prophet Jeremiah, after long sections of warnings to the people of Israel against their sin, he foretells of the promise of restoration after the coming judgement of exile to Babylon. Jeremiah was a prophet in Judah, coming before their exile to Babylon. The prophet gives long and dreary prophesies regarding Israel's sin and thus the coming judgment from Babylon. But now, despite Israel's sin, he tells of the coming fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and David, when God will restore his people from their sin with the coming Messiah.

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Jeremiah 33:14-18:

"'The days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.

15 "In those days and at that time
I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line;
he will do what is just and right in the land.
16 In those days Judah will be saved
and Jerusalem will live in safety.
This is the name by which it will be called:
The LORD Our Righteous Savior.'

For this is what the Lord says: 'David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of Israel, 18 nor will the Levitical priests ever fail to have a man to stand before me continually to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings and to present sacrifices."

This is the Word of the Lord.

If I were to ask you, what you think Jesus is like, what would you say? What would he be like to be around? Would he be funny? Would he be over-serious? More importantly, if I were to ask you, why did God send Jesus to the world, how would you answer? What did God do to prepare the world for Jesus' coming? How does God help us understand who Jesus is?

Many of us, especially those of us who don't read our Bibles very often, if we think of what Jesus is like, will simply think of all the things that we think are good. We know that Jesus was perfect, so we think of what a perfect person might be like. We think of all the kind people we have known, all the wonderful deeds done for us by others, and combine this into one person and that is what Jesus is like.

Most of the time, the Jesus of our subconscious, that is the kind of guy we picture in our minds when we read or hear about him, ends up being like what we wish we were like. The best version of ourselves. We subconsciously assume that he would hate the kind of stuff I hate, and like the kind of stuff I like, or at least what I think I should like. But those underlying assumptions must be challenged by how God has revealed himself, and how he was preparing his people to understand him throughout the Old Testament.

Jesus came as the Messiah to a certain people. God prepared for his coming at Christmas by calling a certain group of people out of slavery at a certain point in history, giving them a certain kind of law, specific prophets and prophesies, particular kings. As we said earlier, as we anticipate celebrating the coming of Jesus at Christmas in Advent, we are going to look at how God prepared the world for Jesus' coming in the people of Israel with the three offices of prophet, priest, and king.

Jesus did not come out of nowhere. Even though he came to deal with the central problem of all humanity, our common rebellion against God in our sin, he came to be the saviour from a specific group of people, crafted by God in a specific way to deal with that problem. As Jeremiah says in our verse, "In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior." He is a Jewish saviour, and Messiah from Israel. Even though we now know that when the prophet Jeremiah says 'Judah', and 'Jerusalem', he means God's whole chosen people, that people is only understandable by looking at how God first gathered Israel. Jesus carries the long tradition of God's people on his shoulders, fulfilling what God has been preparing for thousands of years. One of the most important ways God did this, was in the office of the prophet.

If we are to understand how Jesus fulfills the role of the prophet that God gave Israel, it is probably a good idea to know what it means to be a prophet to begin with. Most of us today, when we hear the words 'prophet' or 'prophecy, we think of someone who is able to tell the future. The prophets did do that, and it was an important way for people to test whether what the prophet was saying was truly from God or not, but when we look at the lives of the prophets and their writings in the Old Testament, we can easily see that this was not their primary job.

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Zacharias Ursinus, the main author of the Heidelberg Catechism defines a prophet as, "a person called by God, to declare and explain his will to us concerning things present or future, which otherwise would have remained unknown, inasmuch as the truths which he reveals are of such a nature that we, of ourselves, could never have attained a knowledge of them."[1]

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The most basic thing a prophet does is speak on behalf of God. There is a common phrase that prophets use when they prophesy, they almost always say something like, "the word of the Lord came to me." The primary role of the prophet is to let the people of Israel know what God thinks about what they are doing. Generally, this means telling them what judgement for their sin is coming, and sometimes it was judgement for the sin of the nations around them. Along with this, there was also talk of how God would eventually save them, and what that salvation would look like.

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[1] Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, p.188.

Often, the prophet's words would be confirmed by miracles (think of the stories of the prophet Elijah). Sometimes the words themselves were miraculous, as in when they told the future. Of course, in a proper sense, all the prophet's words were miraculous, as they a direct action of God, but proof of this is given in their foretelling of events.

We don't know exactly how the prophets would receive their words from God. Paul speaks about them as an "inspiration" (2Tim.3:16), like a breath of God through the prophet. Peter says, "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2Pet.1:19-21). By the Holy Spirit the prophets could know the mind of God for his people and be able to present it to them. In Scripture we see this voice sometimes coming audibly, and sometimes internally, through a dream or vision. Sometimes God spoke through devices like the Urim and Thumim carried by the High Priest, or through the use of lots. The prophets might be taken up into a state of rapture or ecstasy, but they were never unconscious of themselves, they were aware of what was going on, and then gave an account of it.

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The nature of the Biblical prophet must be held in distinction to the way 'prophecy' functions in the pagan world. In the pagan world a person might go to a soothsayer or fortune-teller where a particularly 'gifted' person, a shaman or a sage, might induce a trance through various means, or concoct a ritual, and then tell a person their future. The most famous of these in the ancient era is probably the Oracle of Delphi, the priestess of Apollo in ancient Greece. Depending on who you ask, the oracle would sit in a crevasse of a rock that emitted a strange gas and would be put into a frenzy where she would speak on behalf of the gods to specific people who came to her. She was unaware of what was going on, and was merely a vessel.

This kind of religious expression is seen in various ways and times and places, but all with similar aspects, all pointing to an underlying human urge to know more than what we are given, or what is natural to us. There are still people who 'prophesy' like this today, reading tarot cards and such. We should not dismiss it as a simply a fun or trivial thing, it is a dangerous meddling with the demonic. In our age, there is increasing allure to this kind of thing as organized religion becomes suspect. This is the 'spiritual but not religious' kind of thing, and as G.K. Chesterton says, "When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything."

It is important to emphasize that this kind of shaman/oracle thing is not what the prophets of the Old Testament were doing. Where Israel is seen copying the practices of the nations around them, they are strictly chastised by God. The false prophets in scripture are known

to simply tell people what they want to hear, speaking popular opinions, rather than God's word (1Kgs.22:1-28; Jer.23:9-40).

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The office of the prophet in the Old Testament begins officially in Israel with Moses. Moses is the first one who really speaks on behalf of God, and so he sets the stage for what kind of thing a prophet in Israel will do. The central role of a prophet is being a teacher, they teach what God desires of his people with a revealed insight. The prophets teach what the heart of God's law is, or why God wanted to make his people out of Abraham. We do not hear so much future-telling from Moses, but he did speak on behalf of God. He told the people what God's law was.

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God says to Moses that this office will continue into the future, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (Deut.18:18). While this role of prophet will be perfected in one person, it was also seen in many others.

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One of the prophet's most important tasks was to call God's people to repentance. Often the foretelling of judgement came with the hope that the judgement they were announcing could be averted with repentance. In this way, the prophets are reformers. They call God's people back to covenant faithfulness, to look back to God's word, and respond in faithfulness. The prophets often spoke against the way the powerful would oppress the poor. Much of their denunciation of Israel's action had to do with that oppression from their ruling class.

As the role of the Prophet moved forward from Moses, we see it in men like Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha. We hear about stories of not-so-great prophets like Jonah. We hear often of the false prophets of the nations and how they corrupt the worship of Israel. Then there is the writing of the prophets themselves, seen in books like Ezekiel, Isaiah, and our passage for today, Jeremiah.

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In our passage for today, Jeremiah speaks about the coming Messiah. God will fulfill his promise to his people, as he said to Moses, "I will raise up a prophet like you…" Jeremiah says that this prophet will "do what is just and right in the land." Because of the "just and right" work of this special prophet our passage says, "Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety."

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Jeremiah did not know the kind of work that Jesus would do, but he is given the words to know that God will keep his promises, and his people will be saved. The “just and right” work included all that Jesus did on the earth, fulfilling the work of the prophets in his consummate miracles and teaching. It is in this way that Jesus is able to sit on the eternal throne that Jeremiah mentions, to “never fail to have a man to sit on the throne,” and offer the eternal sacrifice, which never fails “to have a man to stand before me continually…to present sacrifices.” This speaks to the kind of action that no mere prophet, priest, or king could do, but only *the* prophet.

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Jesus was not simply *a* prophet, but *the* prophet. He is what all the other prophets were anticipating. They spoke as servants and mediators of the Word, and Jesus is the Word. Whereas they spoke the truth, Jesus is the Truth. They are an image; he is the reality. No more seeing a shadow, but face to face.

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Jesus is seen doing the role of the prophet especially in the years leading up to his crucifixion. Those around him say that he acts like one with authority (Mt.7:29). He foretells the future, particularly in the way he speaks about the destruction of Jerusalem (Mt.24) and the mission to the Gentiles (Jn.4:21). And he authenticates his testimony with the miraculous in many places. John the Baptist testifies that he is not “the Prophet,” but merely “the forerunner” (Jn.1:21-23). Jesus is everywhere helping the poor, not only the physically poor, but also the “poor in spirit.” Like the prophets in the Old Testament, he denounces the ruling class for their oppression, but especially their spiritual oppression in their interpretation of the law, as we have seen repeatedly in John’s gospel.

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Jesus most clearly shows himself to be *the* prophet when he begins his ministry in Luke 4, where he quotes Isaiah 60:1-2, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” When Jesus closes the scroll, he says, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk.4:21).

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More than simply being one who speaks the word of God, Jesus is the *Word* of God. That is, unlike other prophets, everything Jesus says and does tells people about who God is, and

what his will is for their lives. Who he is, what he does, is a judgement on us, as we are all compared to his perfect life.

In the rest of the New Testament, Jesus is also spoken of as *the* prophet. Hebrews begins with the sentence, "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb.1:1-2). For all the different things we see the prophets doing, we see them perfected in Christ.

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After Christ fulfilled the role of the prophet, that did not mean that there was no more need for prophecy. The last Old Testament prophet is John the Baptist. Jesus fulfills the purpose of the prophet when he comes. But, as Jesus sends his Spirit into the church, we see the prophetic role being taken up by all Christians. First, this is especially in the Apostle's preaching the gospel, which was confirmed by their miracles, and their sure testimony in their writings. The New Testament is a result of their prophetic ministry. The New Testament is just as much the words of God as what came before, and it is right to call the New Testament writers prophets in that sense.

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In the Reformed tradition, it is generally thought that the prophetic ministry is continued by pastors in preaching. While this might seem like an inadequate comparison, it is very similar to the earlier role that the prophets in the Old Testament practiced. They received the word from God, and spoke with his authority. It was not soothsaying, reading cards or palms, it wasn't a private ordeal where they would 'speak into' someone's life with an intuitive leading, but a corporate telling of God's word to his people, applying his word to his people. In this sense, it is right to call preaching 'prophesying'.[2] A big reason why we believe in ordination, is because it confirms to the congregation that a pastor is representing God's work in worship.

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More than simply a pastor having a prophetic role, all Christians have a prophetic aspect to their lives. The Heidelberg Catechism says that we are called Christians because we share in Jesus' role of prophet, priest, and king. The Catechism says that every Christian is a 'prophet' in a sense, as all Christians are "anointed to confess [Jesus'] name." It is through the power of the Spirit that we are able to say, "Jesus is Lord," this is a prophetic utterance. All of our professions of faith are in this sense prophetic.

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[2] See William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying (1592)*.
https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/perkins_prophesying.html

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John writes to his church, “But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. [21] I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth.” The ‘anointing’ of the Holy Spirit comes when you are able to hear the gospel with the ears of faith, and you are filled with truth. The Holy Spirit enlivens us to hear the Word of God in sermons, and read it in Scripture. This is a gift that we are all given right as we come to faith and are enlivened with the Spirit.

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All of us are also, in a prophetic way, ambassadors of God’s word. We are called to bring the gospel to the nations, and as we participate in the life of the church, we all take part in that action. That is what we are doing right now as we proclaim together God’s word.

We also show our prophetic nature as Christians when we do good. It is not that we preach the gospel with our actions, but we show the fruit of the gospel in our life as we do good for others. If it’s God’s will, that could be something miraculous, but it doesn’t have to be. We recognize God’s actions in all the good that he does through us, and in that sense, it is prophetic.

So, when we think about who Jesus is, think about him as God has prepared him to be understood, as fulfilling the role of the prophet in Israel. Jesus speaks on behalf of God, he teaches, he calls his people to repentance, and sets free the oppressed. He is not whatever we want him to be, but God prepared a specific place and situation to reveal himself. Likewise, as we continue his work on earth by the power of his Spirit, we do so like he did. We are not shamans going into some kind of rapture to speak God’s word, but he speaks through us as he enlivens us to hear him, as the gospel is made true in our hearts, and we see him working through our actions. Let’s pray that we will all fully appreciate how we share in Christ’s work as the Prophet.