

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
June 13 & 14, 2015
John Crosby
Samuel
1 Samuel 3**

Welcome to summer in Minnesota. It's a great thing! We're trying to change the pace up this summer. Since we get to go to the lake or jump in the pool, we would like to do something a little different. We're going to spend the summer where we don't usually go, the deep end of the pool, and we're going to talk about a part of the Bible we rarely talk about. If you have a bulletin or a piece of paper, this might be a good time to grab a pencil because this, more than most, will be sort of a note-taking sermon, setting the stage for the rest of the summer that is to come. I'm just encouraging you if you have a pencil to be ready to scratch something down.

I'm going to assume that you are here at least in part because you hope that God speaks. Sometimes you believe that God speaks, but a lot of times you just hope that there is a God and that that God will speak to you. We are all at different places in our journey of life and faith, but we all want to hear something. We want to hear a voice from out there that speaks to us here. We are not always sure what that voice will be or what it will say. When somebody says they speak for God—that God has told them to say this—you both listen carefully and are a little cautious.

Several years ago I was on the north side in a tough neighborhood with a Christian lawyer who had been asked to bring creativity to a foundation. This foundation was trying to figure out how to improve the lives of folks up in that neighborhood and he was asked to be creative about it, so we were sitting down to lunch with a leader in that community. None of us had ever been to this restaurant before. We sat down and as we did so, a woman approached our table and said, "I've been told that I have the spirit of prophecy. I have the gift and I feel like God has given me a word for you." And she pointed, thank goodness, not at me. She pointed at Jay Bennett, the lawyer I was with. She said, "The Lord has told me you are trying to honor God in this season. You need to hear that there will be hard times and that you must persevere." And then she just stood there. Well, Jay was taken aback, but he listened and then he said, "You know, I think I'm just going to let that rest in my spirit, sister." The woman seemed satisfied and left. If somebody came up and said to you, "I think God has something to say to you," how would you respond? What do you think of when you hear the word *prophet*? When you hear about the idea of a person being a prophet, what image does that bring? Is it something like this?

[Video starts.]

Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules, and they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things.

They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.

[Video ends.]

When our society thinks of a prophetic voice, a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King or a Jim Jones, who was a crazy prophet, is that what you think of? When the Bible talks about a prophet, it has a different image in mind. None of the prophets, as far as I can tell, are that smart. None of them are that gifted, like the folks that we just saw on the screen, but what made them prophets was that they insisted they heard a voice from God that you needed to hear. Now think about the things that we usually hear about in sermons and the emotions that they bring out. We talk about joy and sadness and comfort and anger and eternity and serenity. Now think about the prophets. What kind of emotions do they stir up in us? What characterizes them? Don't the prophets strike you as kind of cranky? The prophets are not the life of the party. Not only do they often say something that wrecks the mood, but prophets in the Bible seem to resort to shock tactics that look just bazaar.

You would not want one of them to be your friend, to live in your house. You would not, for instance, want Ezekiel to come and live with you because Ezekiel ate food that was cooked over poop. Really! He ate food that was cooked over poop to show people how defiled they had become. You probably wouldn't want Isaiah living in the guest house. Isaiah walked around naked and barefoot for three years to show what was going to happen to unfaithful people. Try to keep that image out of your mind. You probably wouldn't be comfortable having Hosea in the guest house because Hosea was told by God to marry a prostitute to show how God's people were unfaithful. And even the prostitute couldn't stand him and kept trying to run away. The prophets are filled with this kind of stuff. Prophets seem to be called by God to bring God's Word to broken people living in a broken world and those people don't want to hear that they are broken. We people do not want to hear that we are broken. Is it any wonder that prophets are not the most popular kids in the room, that theirs are not the most popular books in the Bible? Why would you study the prophets, especially in the summer? This is the only good time we have, why spoil it? Please! Let's study the prophets in March and February.

But I would just like to show you something. If you don't mind, take out the Bibles that are in front of you. Every pew here should have Bibles, big black books. I would just like to show you something. It won't take long. The book won't hurt you. What I'd like you to do is turn to Isaiah, chapter 1. If you can't find it really quickly, don't worry about it. It's page 1,019, Isaiah, chapter 1, the first of the written prophets. Put a finger there and then turn to page 1,431 which is the end of the Old Testament, the beginning of the New Testament. Put your finger at each end to see how much of the Bible that is. That is about two-thirds of the prophets in the Bible. There is another third scattered throughout. Somebody has done a study and said that if you were to add it all up, prophets directly account for 250 of the 1,189 chapters in the Bible. Over 20 percent of the Bible is the voice of the prophets. Can we really be a Biblical community and not listen to what the prophets have to say?

There are all different kinds of prophets apparently. There are counselors in the king's court. There are court officials. There are gadfly prophets who are more like op-ed writers and write their opinions. Sometimes they are more like gossip columnists. Some of the prophets are working stiffs, amateurs, like Amos, who was a farmer, but in many ways the whole idea of

being a prophet, hearing a voice from God, starts with one little boy. Deb Kielsmeier tried to tell the kids his story. It says,

3 The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli [the judge of Israel]. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.

2 One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. **3** The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

Think Indiana Jones, the Arc of the Covenant.

4 Then the LORD called Samuel. Samuel answered, “Here I am.” **5** And he ran to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” But Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” So he went and lay down.

6 Again the LORD called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” “My son,” Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” **7** Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

8 A third time the LORD called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. **9** So Eli told Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

10 The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

This is the part we didn’t tell the kids because of the kind of message it was.

11 And the LORD said to Samuel: “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. **12** At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. **13** For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them. **14** Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, ‘The guilt of Eli’s house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.’”

15 Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, **16** but Eli called him and said, “Samuel, my son.” Samuel answered, “Here I am.” **17** “What was it he said to you?” Eli asked. “Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you.” **18** So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, “He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes.”

19 The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel’s words fall to the ground. **20** And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD. **21** The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.

That's what a prophet looks like. Because there are so many bad prophets, false prophets, people who think they are prophets but are not, we want to spend much of this summer helping you hear the real thing. There are three tests of a Biblical prophet. They are pretty simple really. The first is, they say, "This is not my opinion [about this social issue]. I am telling you, I heard a voice from God." **First test: it is a distinct word from God.** The Bible says, "In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions." It was hard to hear apparently. Later prophets heard the word of God in visions, but Samuel hears a voice speaking to him, a distinct word. That's test No. 1.

Test No. 2, the person who hears the voice lives in response. In other words, they not only say what's supposed to be said but they live a different way because of it. Eli says, "Tell me everything He said" and Samuel sucks it up and points to the judgment of God at great cost, I am sure, to their relationship. Real prophets live differently in response.

The third test of someone who is a prophet is that their prophecy comes true. One of the ways you knew someone wasn't a prophet is it didn't come true. You pick the Yankees and the Red Sox win and you kill the prophet because you bet on the Yankees. The proof for a prophet is that what they say comes true. Here it says, "The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD." Not just Samuel's voice but his life.

Why would we spend a summer with the prophets? Because there are so many voices speaking to you that you need help and, frankly, when we read the prophets, we all need help. Here is the deep end of the pool. A lot of you say, "I come to church, but I never learn anything new." If you don't learn something new this summer, I don't think you're listening because we don't often talk about the prophets even from here. One of the things I've become aware of as we decided to do this study is that we pastors tend to cherry-pick from the prophets. We pick our favorite images, our special verses, and we don't study the whole prophecy. It's like the famous one in Jeremiah 29. Many of you know it.

¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future [Jeremiah 29:11].

What a special promise, but the fine print goes on and says, "but it's going to take 70 years." Nobody wants to hear that part of the prophecy. Or Isaiah. We all love Isaiah, right?

³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
³¹ but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint [Isaiah 40:30-31].

But unless you understand why Isaiah is saying that, it just turns into a pep talk that loses its power. If your favorite prophet is Amos because you are a social activist, you love Amos because he says, "I hate coming to worship with you." God says,

- ²¹ “I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
²² Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.
²³ Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream [Amos 5:21-24]!

“And then I’ll show up.” How do you know that isn’t somebody’s crazy right-wing or crazy left-wing opinion? The most popular of the ways that pastors cherry-pick out of the prophets is they use it to prove their point. It happens a lot at Christmas. We quote Isaiah.

- ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel [Isaiah 7:14].

Now, I believe that is a prophecy about Jesus, but the first time it was spoken, I think Isaiah was sitting there talking to a fearful king and saying, “Before that woman over there, do you see the pregnant one, before her baby can walk, all this will come true.” If you don’t know that, do you really understand the prophecy? Most of the way that the prophets are abused these days, I think, is this end of the world stuff. Now I believe the creed. The creed of the church is “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” But people who are deep into prophecy often add, “And it will happen on May 8, 2016 and I know because I have opened the book of Daniel and I have opened the book of Revelation. I have opened the book of Hezekiah, Hesitations, whatever it is, and they say, ‘Here’s when it’s going to happen. The day of the Lord will come and the dead will rise.’” They are timing the end of the world and I think, frankly, often mistiming it.

So, we need help if we are going to hear a word from God. We want to hear a word from God, but we need help. We need to do it together. Reading the prophets is like reading Shakespeare with its lovely sounds, but what the heck does that mean? We need help with Shakespeare. We need help with the prophets, so in the time we have left, I’d like to help you. Here is how to understand the prophets. The word is *context*. Context is everything. **If you are going to read the prophets, you have to understand the context of the prophets.** There are, for instance, all different kinds of prophets. Samuel is one of what we would call the political prophets. They are attached to the power structure of Israel. They are often used as advisors to the king. Nathan is with King David, having much the same experience. Elijah and Elisha are political prophets and they are talking to the here and now mostly.

The second group of prophets are people we don’t think of as prophets at all, but the Spirit of God comes and speaks to them. Moses, for instance, is seen as a prophet because God spoke to him and he spoke to others, but you don’t think of Moses as a prophet. In the same way, the Gospel of John written by John the apostle is viewed as prophecy because of the book of Revelation, but you don’t think of Moses and John as prophets. It is their secondary role. The prophets we are going to spend the most time with this summer are the ones who are called the writing prophets. The writing prophets are the ones who had a vision, who spoke the vision and

then went back and wrote it down so they wouldn't forget. They wrote it down so the person they talked to wouldn't forget and nobody would forget. They wanted to make sure everybody knew so they wrote it down.

There are five major prophets and 12 minor prophets. Now, the minor prophets are just as important as the major prophets; they just wrote short stories instead of novels. They are all the writing prophets. That's context. There are all different kinds of prophets. They all speak in different ways. Mostly the prophets use poetry. The reason you and I don't understand the way they write is that they are using poetry. We would not understand poetry any better than most of us would understand rap, but rap is communication that goes to the heart instead of just the head. The poets and the prophets are trying to speak to the heart. They use symbols and imagery. They use hyperbole. "This is the worst ever possible!" They use double meanings. When somebody says, "No. 23 from the Bulls went wild," in the day you would have said, "Michael Jordan had a big night playing for the Chicago Bulls" unless you were not a basketball fan. It has a double meaning. Context is everything.

I want to say context is everything in another way because you will not understand what the prophets are saying to you unless you understand what the prophets were saying to them. You wouldn't understand what the prophets were saying to them unless you understood the time that they lived in. Context is everything. I can say to you, "Let's eat, Grandpa." It has a very different meaning if I say, "Let's eat Grandpa." Right? Context is everything. When the prophets are talking, they are speaking to a society much like ours in that it was the best of times and it was the worst of times. Dickens was talking about both 8th Century B.C. Israel and us. The best of times and the worst of times. If you are in good shape in this economy, you are in good shape. If you are on the bottom, things are terrible. That's the way it was for the prophets. People in the know, people in the church or the temple at the time, didn't understand what all the fuss was because things had never been better. People on the bottom said, "The reason it feels better to you is because you're standing on my neck" and the prophets' job was to call that out.

The second way that context of the prophets was everything is that it was a very religious time. Everybody went to church all the time but it was mostly religious lip service. Does that sound familiar? In America between 1950 and 2000, this was a nation of Christendom. Everybody went to church. Everybody was a member of a church and it made very little difference whether you went to church or not because there wasn't much connection between what you did in church on Sunday and the way you closed the deal on Thursday afternoon. That is what was happening in Israel. They had set the law of Moses aside and were getting what they could, and then going to church and feeling good about it.

The last thing about context being everything, I want to show you visually. The reason that Israel thrives at this time, the reason that David becomes king and then Solomon, his son, becomes emperor of little Israel, is that Israel has for 400 years been ignored by the big empires. Israel is a very tiny, tiny country. It's not even as big as from here to Duluth. It's a tiny country, but it's a land bridge between Africa, Europe, and Asia. It is a country everybody had to go through. The empires, as they grew, would overtake it. Here's what it looked like in those days, 3,000 BC.

We'll stop when we get to the time of Jesus. The Egyptians had been there forever and Egypt was big. Then the Hittites came and they came to the edge of where Israel is. The Israelite empire grew under David and there was peace and prosperity. But then, all of a sudden the Assyrians come, and they are a huge threat to Israel until the Babylonians come. The

Babylonians were even worse, but they were overshadowed by the Persians. Then a hundred years before the time of Jesus, the Romans conquered the world. Each of these empires overlaps. They bring huge turmoil and threat to Israel and these are the times that the prophets speak into. It's like after World War II when all of the European empires collapsed. It was into that instability that the prophets were saying, "Here's what is going to come next." That's how to understand the world of the prophets.

The third way that context is everything for the prophets is that we need to understand their messages. I think there are three primary messages in the prophets. We want to think that there is one. The prophet says this in 600 B.C. and now in 2017, it is going to come true. Not so much. I think **there are three primary themes.**

- I think that the first of the writing prophets, we call them the early prophets, spoke **words of warning or judgment.** Israel was thriving and they were going further and further from God. The word of judgment is, "If you don't come back to God, if you don't act with justice, bad things are going to happen. Trust me." Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, they say, "Stop the madness! Turn around or it's going to be bad!" And you know what? The Israelites didn't stop. They didn't listen and so bad things came. Israel is split apart by civil war and then conquered from the outside and that brought a second role for the prophets.
- They didn't turn around and say, "I told you so. I told you so." Well, they did a little. They instead made their **primary message about consolation.** Some of you need a word of warning. You are going the wrong way. Many of you need a word of consolation. The prophets' job when things have gone terribly wrong is to say, "God has not abandoned us. Don't abandon God." That happens in the middle life of the prophets after Israel is conquered. Then it gets even worse. Israel is not only conquered, it is torn apart and destroyed. Jerusalem is wiped out and they take the leaders off to foreign empires.
- In that time the emphasis of the prophets changes again. It's not just judgment. It's not just consolation. It's **a word of restoration,** of hope. The prophets are vague, saying, "There is nothing that you have lost that God cannot bring back. There is a future where God will make all things new. Hang on, don't lose hope." Hope is not the same as *the sun will come out tomorrow.* It's not that kind of *pie in the sky.* It is the hope that God was in charge at the beginning, and God is in charge now. Hope in the goodness of God. In each of these settings, back then and right now, God is looking to give you a word and God is looking for your response.

We are going to spend lots of time this summer talking about that message, but I want to close with what the Bible is *not* in prophecy because I think there are many false prophets, back then in the Bible and here and now. A prophet is not a social critic. A prophet is not a person who sees your flaws and is sure how they should fix them. A prophet is not a person with a sure-fire plan for your life and that you should support their ministry. That is not a prophet. The Bible says, "Test the spirits."

4 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world [1st John 4:1].

In a world of health and wealth and self-absorption and patriotic fervor, we need to learn to hear the voice of God in our day. I need to say one more thing. Preaching from the prophets is risky business. There's a sociologist named James Hunter. He's written a great critique of Christianity and culture and it's called *To Change the World*. Hunter argues that in our society, the public square has become so politicized that people assume that everything, everything in art or religion or literature, can be placed on a political spectrum from left to right and judged. And that means when we preach the prophets, unless we make it a dialog and unless we speak with care, when people talk about the prophets, you are going to assume that words like *justice* or *poverty* or *sexuality* or *life* or *righteousness* are really code words for some partisan political position that one of us has.

Over and over as we study the prophets, I need to explain that the values embedded in the prophets don't necessarily have a straight-line translation into modern-day legislation. For instance, I think all followers of Jesus are obligated to be on the side of the poor, to help the poor. I do not think that means you have to vote for a minimum wage raise. I think there are great economists on both sides of that argument and the key is not whether you vote *yes* or *no*. The key is what will help the poor the most. It is not my job, it is not the pastor's job, to tell you things that are outside of my sphere of expertise, but we must talk about the prophets' passion for the justice of God.

Now sometimes the prophets got killed because they were saying things people didn't want to hear. Sometimes we honor the prophets and ignore them. And many times, like with Jonah, prophets are honored and they change society. Samuel later says, looking back, that the Word of the Lord was rare. I wonder if that was because God stopped talking or because comfortable people stopped listening or if their ears were being tickled with just what they wanted to hear and God had to change the volume.

Let me leave you with this. I really hope you'll come back this summer. I believe that the voice of the prophets is central to the voice of Jesus Christ. We stay with the prophets because justice matters to Jesus. Justice matters to Jesus because the Kingdom of Jesus is a place where justice prevails. I cannot love Jesus without loving God's justice. The prophets remind people that in Jesus, justice prevails. It is on a cross that we see most clearly God's hatred of injustice. It is at an empty tomb that we see most loudly the proclamation that the justice of God will win. You and I get to decide whether we will listen or not to those uncomfortable voices and what we'll do with that voice. Let's pray.

Lord God, all of us sometimes listen to the prophets and we need warning. That's uncomfortable for us. It makes us feel guilty, angry. But some of us today need consolation, the reminder that even in bad times, You will never leave us. And some of us even today, need to hear the prophet speak a word of restoration, restoration that gives hope, hope that will come back from the dead like You did, hope that will never die. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Spirit, let us hear Your voice. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.