

**Text:** [Mark 12:28-34](#)  
**Date:** September 8, 2019  
**Title:** “Jesus the Prophet: Returning to Our First Love” – Week 1  
**Theme:** Jesus, like the prophets, is that friend who challenges us when we’ve lost sight of what’s important.

## Intro

This week, in addition to returning to our regular schedule, we’re starting a new series

And I’m excited about it because it gives us an opportunity to explore Jesus’ message from a different perspective

One of the challenges the church always faces is to make sure we don’t ‘domesticate’ Jesus

That is, assume we already know exactly what he’s about, exactly what his message means

Because once we’ve done that – it can still be challenging, but not quite in the same way it was before

We need to give Jesus space to speak to us in new ways

And so for the next few weeks, we’re going to explore his message through the lens of the Old Testament prophets

Because I believe that’s how people in his time would have seen him – as a prophet

We know that most people didn’t recognize him as the Savior – otherwise he wouldn’t have ended up on a cross!

Instead, he was a guy from Galilee who had a message: a healer, a teacher

I know that most of us aren’t super familiar with the prophets – myself included

So let’s see what we can learn by looking at him with new eyes

Ready to get started?

## Question

Is there someone in your life who challenges you - who cuts through your pretensions to speak truth, even when it’s hard to hear?

## 1

Anyone remember these? <slide>

The Magic 8-Ball, first marketed in the 1950s, is a classic  
My neighbor had one, my kids had one – it's a fun thing to have around  
You know how it works: ask a yes-or-no question, shake it up, and the  
Magic 8-ball will predict the future  
Or not? "Reply hazy, ask again."

BTW, of the 20 answers, 10 are yes, 5 are maybe, and 5 are no – ask your  
questions accordingly

This is how most of us think about prophets:  
As those who tell us what's coming  
Who predict the future

But guess what? In the words of the Magic 8-Ball: "My sources say no."

## 2

Let's start by talking about who the prophets are – at least from a Christian  
perspective – Jews have a different way of thinking about the Bible  
But when we say "the books of the prophets," we're talking about 3 "Major"  
prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel <slide>

And then a dozen "Minor" prophets – including Jonah and stars that you  
never hear read in church, including Haggai and Nahum

Now, there are other prophets that get mentioned in other places who don't  
have their own books, but who are also important – people like Elijah  
and Elisha

And yes, it's true, their words often DID foreshadow things to come  
Certainly many passages – particularly in Isaiah, but also in Micah and  
others, for example, seem to resemble details about Jesus we know  
from the gospels

But on a deeper level, we should think about prophets not as those who tell  
the future, but those who tell the truth

People who speak a word that God first spoke to them – they usually  
introduce their message with "Thus says the Lord"

These are people who have had a direct, often visionary encounter with the living God

And who then, as a result, feel called to speak God's message – often very reluctantly – we'll talk about why that is in a couple weeks

But it's safe to say, many of them felt this calling as a burden:

Jeremiah famously wrote, "When I say I'm not going to do it, I'm not going to speak in God's name, then it becomes like a fire shut up in my bones, I cannot hold it in" (Jeremiah 20:9)

### 3

When we read the New Testament, there's one person we think about as a prophet cut from that Old Testament cloth

John the Baptist

Every year near Christmas we talk about him, he comes around preaching fire and brimstone, the ax is already at the root of the tree and all that, dressed in camel's hair, eating locusts and honey

He even dressed like an old-time prophet – he's described just like Elijah, who lived about 1000 years before John

John's basic message was this: "Repent! For the kingdom of God is at hand."

Every gospel is consistent on this point: repentance was John's message  
And we think of Jesus as being so radically different from John

But as soon as John was arrested by King Herod, guess who picked that message up and ran with it?

Jesus. (cf. Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15, Luke 5:32)

The NT says that very explicitly in Matthew and Mark.

Jesus went to work preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand."

### 4

Repentance was at the core of the Old Testament prophets' messages too  
Change your ways. Turn around.

Allow God to transform your life & the nation.

And the sin that was first and foremost in the prophet's minds was putting other things in place of God.

Over and over again, they compare Israel's relationship to God to a marriage where one spouse is stepping out  
It's a recurring theme.  
Foreign gods. Alliances with great and powerful nations.  
Wealth. Pleasure. Sometimes even religion.  
These are all things that the prophets, at various times, accused Israel of putting first – forgetting about their first love.

## 5

The prophets had a unique way of cutting through the noise, calling you out, and pointing people back to what's real  
Do you have friends like that?  
Who are willing to call you out when you're laying the you-know-what (let's say, self-deception) on a little too thick?  
When you're playing the self-righteousness card a little too often?

We all NEED friends like that  
Here's the thing, though – we all know we NEED friends like that, the question is whether we WANT them

## 6

Jesus, in Mark chapter 12, spends the entire chapter arguing with the great religious minds of his day  
He tells them ANOTHER story about a vineyard,  
answers a very tricky question about whether it's right to pay taxes to the emperor,  
entertains a ridiculous hypothetical about what would happen when a woman whose been married 7 times goes to heaven,  
and finally gets fed up with it all and tells them off

But in the middle of this, there's one guy who asks a serious question and gets a serious answer  
His question seems simple:  
"Which commandment is the most important?"

Jesus answers, "Love God. Love people." Which to us seems so basic.  
But only because we've heard it a million times.

It's our mission statement – right? Except we say *serve* people because it's too easy to think of love as emotion rather than action.  
Love has got to *do* something.

In Jesus' time, though, the question of what commandment was most important was a key question – people asked it of leading rabbis all the time

When the religious authorities tell you there are 600+ commandments in the Bible, it's hard figure out where to focus

You need someone to break it down in a way that you can live out

To answer the question at all is to critique the way things are

It's a way to say, "y'all are making things way too complicated"

And that's also embedded in the way Jesus' questioner responds:

"Yes, clearly those two things are more important than burnt offerings"

This is Jerusalem, where the Temple, the sacrificial system are in full swing

He too feels like, "I'm not sure this is about what it ought to be about anymore."

They're saying this while actually standing in the Temple – where they can probably smell the fires burning!

That's what prophets do

Regardless of who they are talking to – priests, kings, ordinary people

They are willing to say the hard thing that others don't want to say

That helps them see that their pretensions about knowing God

About serving God

About doing God's will

Aren't necessarily accurate

## 7

I've been listening to Bruce Springsteen's autobiography

I've been telling everyone I'm talking to about it

I'm not like, a massive Springsteen fan – but the book is great, and to hear him read it is even better

I have appreciated him much more after Steph and I saw him live a few years ago

What I love about his book is that it is simultaneously incredibly pretentious  
And surprisingly real

Pretentious, in that he can talk for hours about what the magic of live performance means to him  
Or when he describes all the nuances of he was aiming for in a particular studio album

But in the next breath, he can talk about how he would go home to, well, no home at all –  
about being rootless, without family, without lasting relationships  
An amazing life, on the one hand, drawing huge crowds of devoted fans  
but once the house lights went off, the amps switched off and the mics unplugged, an ultimately empty life  
Feeling like he'd missed the point

I think there's a parallel to what the prophets, including Jesus, are all trying to tell us:

You can do a lot of religious stuff  
You can worship in a grand temple  
You can say a lot of good words and think a lot of good thoughts about God  
Repost all the Jesus-y memes you want

But the essence of the life of faith is simple:  
Love God  
Love your neighbor

That's what matters  
And when we get away from that, we've abandoned the love we had at first

## 8

So today, I want to encourage you to consider a couple questions about loving God and loving your neighbor:

If you could put yourself in God's place, honestly, would YOU feel loved by YOU? Are you talking? Spending time together?

What about your neighbors? Your family? Friends? Colleagues at work? Strangers? When's the last time you went out of your way to help someone?

Jesus the Prophet is that friend who asks hard questions  
You may not always want him around – but you NEED him around

To tell us when we've lost sight of what's important  
Of our first love

Amen.

**By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ**