March 17, Lent 2C (Luke 13:31-35)

Prophecy is a job not for the comfortable but for the afflicted.

by Eric D. Barreto in the February 27, 2019 issue

Luke's Jesus is prophetic. His first sermon in Luke 4 promises reversals of fortune and deliverance from oppression. The healings he performs foretell a reign in which sickness does not rend relationships. The stories he tells paint a picture of a confounding but hopeful world of unjust judges who finally heed the call to justice, and of sons who make their way home again, and of Samaritans who care for the afflicted. Even his birth is heralded by the prophetic singing of Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon, their songs promising a world set upside down and right side up.

For all these reasons, I turn to Luke's Jesus for hope—especially in these days when justice seems to be in short order. But I have to be careful when I yearn for his prophetic words to turn into a world of righteousness.

The prophet's job is unenviable. Preachers and leaders too often miss this, assuming that speaking truth to power is righteous and right and maybe even easy. Our tendency to surround ourselves, both on social media and in real life, with people who agree with us can inure us to the difficult path a prophet takes up.

After all, the prophet's job is to tell hard truths we do not want to hear. The prophet will not receive applause and acclaim, prestigious platforms on which to speak, or gilded invitations into the halls of power. The prophet will be denied and ignored and maligned.

Why do we reject prophets? Precisely because they speak hard truths. We know the prophets are right when they point a gnarled finger in our direction and name the sin that entangles us—when they name those fragilities we most fear, when they whisper in our ears the things we most want to deny. We know the prophets are right when their clarion voices thunder in our ears as our complicity in injustice is called out. We know the prophets are right, but we still reject them—because to

agree with them is to condemn ourselves.

Prophecy is a job not for the comfortable but for the afflicted, not a calling for the certain but for those burdened by the suffering of their communities. Prophecy sets prophets against the powerful in ways most of us do not seek.

In the Gospels, getting Herod's attention is not exactly desirable. The Herodian legacy for cruelty echoes from the killing of the innocents through John the Baptist's execution. For the Gospel writers, being on the empire's radar is a ready recipe for suffering. But in this week's reading, when Jesus hears that Herod wants to kill him, he does not cower or react tremulously. He parries. He retorts. He literally speaks truth to power.

The episode immediately follows Jesus' revolutionary proclamation in Luke 13:22–30, preaching that evokes both the possibilities and the complexities of the reign of God. Now Jesus hears that Herod has him in the imperial crosshairs. Luke does not narrate Herod's specific concerns about this Galilean peasant, only that Herod wants to extinguish Jesus and his prophetic tongue, his healing hands, his wandering feet. Apparently, Jesus' words sizzle with danger. The wholeness his hands bring is a rebuke of the empire's feckless seizure of power. His peripatetic proclamation pays no heed to the boundaries empires draw.

In certain quarters of the church, being prophetic is the highest of callings. That impulse makes sense to me. In a moment of political and theological crisis, prophetic voices are desperately needed. We need prophetic condemnations of racism, prophetic protest of walls meant to assuage fear rather than create opportunity, prophetic calls to environmental justice, prophetic poetry that helps us name justice with beauty and truth.

But prophets also have to count the costs. I worry that I relish the feeling of being a prophet in a silo of my own creation, an echo chamber in which every head nods in agreement and the Facebook likes and retweets grow along with my ego. I worry that "prophetic" truth telling can lack empathy and sorrow and love.

This is not the vocation of the prophet. The path of the prophet is both righteous and difficult, right and lonely, needed and costly, confrontational and loving.

Prophets don't predict what is next. They look at the world as it is and, through their God-suffused imagination, see it transformed. What if violence and death were not

the order of the day? What if compassion, not selfishness, reigned in our midst? What if we could all see ourselves and our neighbors as God sees us?

The prophet plants herself in the present, in all its blessedness and mire, and says *God is present here*. She declares a new world, and in this bold, courageous declaration, God acts. In the very act of speaking a God-inspired word of consolation and hope, prophecy comes to life in our midst—as we lift our hands to serve our neighbor and move our feet to go to the most desolate places and discover there that God and God's servants are very much alive, very much present. We find that such places are not so desolate after all.

Moreover, the prophet names our acts of injustice—and we push back in various and violent ways. We reject, silence, even kill prophets because their words are dangerous. But such violent rejections do not get the last word. Even as we snuff out prophets, their last words are not condemnation but the reconciliation God offers, God's yearning that we would return to God's embrace.

We so desperately need prophetic voices today. Are we willing to heed them? Are we willing to count the costs of a world turned upside down?