

## **“Listening to Troublers”**

*Reading: Amos 5:8-15; 1 Kings 18:1-21*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

On one side of the pulpit next to me I have the safety manual and documentation that came with this nifty little Dremel tool that my parents recently got for me. I've heard that a lot of people really love their Dremels, since depending on what bit you put in them, it can grind and carve and drill and slice and dice just about anything. So here I have this stack of information that came in the packaging. The manual says that on its highest setting, it spins at about 20,000 RPM. I tested it with its abrasive tip on a piece of stone, and it carves stone with no problem at all, so just imagine what it could do to a finger.

On the other side of the pulpit here I have the first letter Pastor Carey sent to me back when we were dating. I spent the summer working out west and I didn't have cell phone coverage and I didn't have good email access, so writing letters was the best way we had to keep in touch. The old National Park hotel where I worked had its own little post office crammed into a space about the size of a closet, and the wonderful little old lady who operated it got to recognize me pretty well as I constantly checked to see if I got any new letters. A lot of those letters were pretty worn by the end of the summer; I read them and re-read them until I just about had them memorized.

So here's the question: do you think for one second that I read the safety manual for my Dremel in the same way that I read my letters from Carey when we were dating? Of course not, and if you read safety manuals for tools like you read love letters, give me a call and we'll schedule you for some marriage counseling. Yes, I did look through the manual to make sure I wasn't doing anything wrong, and I'm not suggesting for a second that the safety manual isn't important since this little tool could easily do some nasty damage, but the simple fact is that we hear different types of messages differently. We don't always listen in the same way. Sometimes we get a message we've been waiting for, something we've been eagerly looking forward to, and we read it over and over again to get every last bit of meaning out of it. Other times, if it's a message that isn't quite so exciting, we skip over the details and focus on the main point. We don't read safety manuals like we read love letters.

This week in our chapter of *The Story* we're beginning to focus on what the prophets had to say in the Bible. Some of their messages are like love letters, and others are like safety manuals, and the whole point of a prophecy is that we would train ourselves to heed the hard messages just as much as we enjoy the nice messages. Sometimes the prophets proclaim magnificent, poetic messages of God's love, or they describe the majesty and power of God in awe-inspiring ways, and we love those kinds of messages. Other times, maybe more often, they proclaim messages of warning and conviction for sin. Both are messages from God. Both call us to action and expect us to respond in some way. And the prophets want us to make sure we listen closely to both.

The prophets in the Bible usually filled the role of covenant mediators. They were, in a sense, police officers enforcing God's laws. They didn't throw people in jail for not being holy enough, but they did represent God and speak for God. God's people had made a covenant with Him, an enduring relationship built on certain expectations and promises, and the prophets were sent by God to warn people about the consequences or the blessings that would result from breaking or keeping that covenant. There are all sorts of prophecies in the Bible, so many that one of the major divisions of the

Old Testament is nothing but the writings of the prophets. They proclaimed their messages for hundreds of years. All of the books from Isaiah to Malachi are books of the prophets. And consistently, their message is this: go the way God is calling you to go, and you will be blessed, but if you persist in rebelling against God, there will be consequences. Prophecy isn't so much about telling the future as it is proclaiming the truth of the present, and how the choices we make now will impact the future.

Over and over and over again, the prophets proclaimed, "This is what the Lord says." That was their role. Sometimes they were welcomed, but more often they were insulted, ignored, and even persecuted. It seems kind of ridiculous to think that you might not listen to someone like Elijah, someone who literally speaks for God and has such a powerful relationship with God and is so filled with God's Spirit that he can do incredible miracles and accurately predict when droughts will begin and end. Want to know what God thinks we should do as a church or as individuals or as a nation? Just stop by Elijah's house and ask him. And how many of us go through times when we would desperately like some word directly from God, a word of guidance or encouragement? How often do we go through times of doubt or despair and would give just about anything for one short message directly from God? How many people are there who desperately need to receive a letter from God letting them know that they are loved and invited to be a part of His family? Why on earth *wouldn't* you want to listen to a prophet?

Well, the problem is that we don't read instruction manuals like we read love letters. Sometimes we want a love letter telling us how wonderful we are and how loved we are when what we really need is an instruction manual telling us not to do stupid things with power tools. Love letters are much more exciting than instructions telling us what we're doing wrong, especially when those instructions are pointed and hit home hard.

What is it that King Ahab asked Elijah in our reading for today? "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" Prophets weren't often liked because they expected you to do something differently. God doesn't need to send a prophet to tell you to do what you would do anyway. We read a bit of Amos's prophecy, and he said some things that are hard to listen to. "You levy a straw tax on the poor...therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them...for I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins." The rich were taking advantage of the poor, and God called them to account for it. He says that their judges are taking bribes and letting the guilty, powerful, rich people go free, and God sees what they're doing and will punish them for it. They're breaking their part of the covenant, and so God is going to give them the consequences that they have agreed to. Prophets say hard things. They're troublers; they try to shake things up and move people. Elijah cries out to the people, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal is God, follow him." Go one way or the other, he says. But the people stayed silent, complacent, noncommittal.

We don't really have prophets in the same way today as they did in the days of Elijah; it was a unique role tied to God's covenant with Israel. They held a special office of sorts to provide a check to the rulers and the priests and the people. We can't just go down the street to the local prophet's house to inquire about the word of the Lord, and I would personally be pretty skeptical of anyone today who claimed to be a prophet like Elijah. But we still ache to hear the word of the Lord for us today. We still need to know how God is guiding us and calling us to live. We still need to hear both

the instruction manual and the love letters from God. So while we don't have prophets like Elijah wandering around today, we do have those who are gifted by God's Spirit to speak the truth of God in a prophetic role. There is a spiritual gift of prophecy that we sometimes see in the church. As we grow closer to God personally and together as a body, we come more in tune with the ways in which the Spirit speaks, and so we should, as we mature, become better at hearing God's voice.

But here's the thing: we have to be listening. I'd bet that just about everyone would love to hear a message directly from God, but how many of us are really listening? And how many of us are listening to what God actually wants to say, rather than what we'd like to hear from Him? Sometimes we don't hear the messages from God we want to hear because we're not listening to the messages we *need* to hear from God. I'm sure King Ahab would have loved to listen to Elijah if Elijah had said that God was promising peace, power, and prosperity for Ahab's reign. But what Ahab needed to hear first was the call to repentance, the command to clean up his life, the instruction to set aside other gods and serve the Lord alone. He didn't listen to the instruction manual, so he wasn't going to hear any love letters. When God speaks, He almost always speaks to provoke a response from us, so if we're looking for a word from God that doesn't want a response from us, we're probably not going to hear anything.

We've been reading *The Story* together for the last several months now, and the point is for us to get a better understanding of the overall story of God's work with His people throughout the Bible and history. Then, when we read parts of the Bible, we have a better sense of where the parts fit in the whole. But more than that, the larger point is that the story would continue in our lives as well. We're not just reading Bible stories about other people, we're learning about what God is doing so that our stories can become a part of God's story. So as we read about these prophets and their messages to their culture and the amazing things they did, they're not just stories confined to a book — they're stories that continue in you and me.

Again, we don't have prophets like Elijah these days, but we do have the Spirit of God who is willing to speak to us directly and through one another. The prophets challenged their generation with the question of whether they were willing to really hear the word of God: would they accept God's message or reject it? The challenge for us today is the same. God is still speaking. Sometimes He speaks through the Bible; He's already told us what He thinks about some things, and He doesn't need to repeat Himself if we'll just listen. Sometimes He speaks to us as we pray. Sometimes He speaks to us through the church, through a sermon or a study or a brother or sister in the congregation.

So the question is whether we are listening. How are you listening for God? How are you giving God time and space to speak to you? What will be your response when God *does* speak to you? He may call you to work toward making things right for the poor, as He spoke through Amos. He may call you to love someone who is very difficult to love. He may call you to simplify or sacrifice something to clear some room for Him. He may call you to set aside some other god you've been worshiping. He may call you to wait for Him. He may call you to rest, or He may call you to action. He may call you to repent, or He may call you to buckle down and do what you know you're supposed to do, or He may call you to simply be encouraged by His great love for you. How are you giving time and space for God to speak to you?



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