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“He was amazed at their lack of faith” (Mark 6:6).

2 Sam 24:2, 9-17: Mark 6:1-6

Last month at the DAVOS conference, a gathering of many of the richest people in the world, Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg was called a “prophet of doom” for her warnings about climate change. Apart from the political ironies of the moment, her critics aptly identified Thunberg as a prophet in the biblical tradition. Like prophets of old, she was reminding the body of the basic truth of the common good and the responsibility of present generations to protect future generations. Current behaviors for short-term gain are setting in motion a trajectory toward long-term harm to the planet that will endanger everyone, but especially today’s young people.

When Jesus visited his hometown of Nazareth, his message about the need for conversion was lost in criticism of his claims of authority in the light of his ordinary background. Who was this Jesus, son of a carpenter, known to everyone from childhood? Who did he think he was, reading the prophet Isaiah and claiming it was about him? As resentment rose, even the miracles people expected faded for their lack of faith, and when Jesus quoted a familiar adage about prophets being welcome everywhere except in their own place, the crowd was indignant and drove Jesus out of town.

Real prophets, by definition, make us uncomfortable. They spoil the party by contrasting our excesses and lack of foresight with our own stated ideals. They do not predict the future as much as warn us that our failure to keep past promises is what is setting a trajectory of suffering into an unknown future. How many heroes and prophets we honor now were martyred in their own times? How many voices were silenced or ignored when their wisdom might have created a different world than the one we have now?

The hardest challenge is to identify those prophets among us now we should be heeding. Perhaps they are those who make us uncomfortable, who ask us to change ways we rely on for our comfort and security even when we know they are unfair and harmful to others? Prophets stir our consciences; tell us truths we already know but that ask too much of us. Prophets get under our skin, question our denials, probe the assumptions and prejudices that excuse us from changing.

What Jesus offered the people of Nazareth was the chance to be true to themselves, and to set themselves free from fears and old habits in order to see the world differently, especially regarding the poor, the blind, the captives and the oppressed. Isaiah's prophecy was tied not to doom but to a jubilee of God's mercy and the chance to restore right relationships. The Good News is not without cost, but the price of rejecting or postponing what is right and true is also enormously expensive. That Greta Thunberg was not hailed as a prophet of hope and a sign of courage may be one of the great tragedies of our time.

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