We seem to live in an age of prophets, not actual ones but ones who play prophet on the TV or internets. These self-appointed prophets are the people who feel that they are gifted with more than ordinary moral insight and therefore get to pass judgment on the rest of humanity, informing the unenlightened who is saved and who is condemned. I am sure you have run into them, maybe on cable news, in the comment sections on the internet or perhaps they are one of your friends on the Facebook. They will hurl vitriol at whoever it is with whom they disagree, maybe its environmentalists, maybe those who support the 2nd amendment or perhaps those who have different views on immigration. Regardless of who they are or where they come down on an issue there is some prophet willing to condemn and tell them that they are beyond the pale. Now, as I said these people are not really prophets – they are to Old Testament prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah what the Hamburgler is to organized crime, but still it does not stop them from spreading their own particular and special version of prophesy.

By this point you may be asking yourself what exactly it is that I am talking about and how does it relate to anything sermon-y…well let me explain. If you ever take a look at some of the real prophet’s messages you will see that they can be a little harsh. So for example Amos in the Old Testament says things like, “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria, the notable men of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel come!” If you want to get more current in the New Testament you have John the Baptist saying things like, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” And so obviously one of the things that prophets do is tell people what they are doing wrong but they do something else. They tell them to repent of the evil they have done and return to the Lord. After John calls the Pharisees and Sad’ducees a brood of vipers he follows it up by saying, “Bear fruit that befits repentance.” This second part differentiates real prophets from our modern day ones who like to stop with the condemnation part and ignore the returning to the Lord bit. In practicality what this means is that either consciously or unconsciously they are saying that those with whom they disagree are beyond God’s saving embrace, and this is not a good thing. Prophecy like chainsaw juggling is not an event to be entered into by the amateur, because unfortunately, unlike chainsaw juggling, the amateur prophet hurts people besides themselves and to see why let’s look to what the prophet Jeremiah tells us today.

He says, “I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back-- those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart?” Prophesy, it would seem, is a rather tricky business because of the fact that many will want to prophesy, but what they will prophesy is not from God but rather “the deceit of their own heart.” Put simply we misunderstand our beliefs and opinions with those of God. So instead of doing something to build up the kingdom of God we do something to build up the kingdom of us.

The danger with everyone being a prophet is that everyone is looking outside of themselves to find the problems of the world and ignoring the things that they can actually change. One of my favorite quotes and you have probably heard me say it before comes from P. J. O’Rourke who said, “Everyone wants to save the world, no one wants to help mom with the dishes.” I mean everyone has an opinion on immigration, gun control or tax policy, but how many focus any of that energy on local issues like people at senior centers who are lonely or your neighbor who needs help with the yard work. T.S Elliot in his essay *The Idea of a Christian Society* said, “Our preoccupation with foreign politics during the last few years has induced a surface complacency rather than a consistent attempt at self-examination of conscience.” Being obsessed with others and their perceived wrongs prevents us from growing in God, either internally or externally. It is a distraction at best and evil at worst and I have a theory about why we want to be the type of prophet that tells everyone around the world what they are doing wrong.

I think our age of mediocre prophesy is really nothing more than gossip in the internet age. Think about it, if two hundred years ago you wanted to condemn something that had recently happened it pretty much had to be about something close at hand – the new buggy that the parson was driving or the scandal of the town clerk’s wife wearing a corset. If you wanted to denounce current events they had to be local and everyone pretty much agreed that if you did such things you were a gossip and a busy body. But now with the introduction of the 24-hour news cycle and the iPhone we have at our fingertips a whole host of new information that we can judge and denounce and the beauty of it is that it all sounds so sophisticated. When I am talking about the new paint color of someone’s house it can sound sort of petty, but when I can dress it up and judge people over the fate of humanity then I get to be much more important. If you are not just showing bad taste but threatening the survival of our species because of your views on a pebble mine in rural Alaska, then I can hurl all sorts of nasty things in your direction. And because this confusing of gossip with prophesy is such a powerful and intoxicating mix it is very hard to control. We can indulge our basest instincts all while convincing ourselves that we are doing important and sophisticated work -- for short we can call it the Hugh Hefner principle.

But does our gossip really have world saving importance? To answer that lets for a moment check in with Luther’s favorite book of the Bible and see what James tells us. He says this, “Do not speak evil against one another, brethren. He that speaks evil against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge... But who are you that you judge your neighbor?” Spanning the globe to bring the constant variety of gossip does not change the fact that we are speaking evil against one another. As a famous person once said (or at least a guy I went to business school with) “A rat in a tuxedo is still a rat.” Lashing out at our fellow humanity and saying that they are beyond redemption is a very bad thing to do, no matter how important we make it sound. The real idea of prophesy is correction and correction can only be done in love. Telling someone how wrong they are is not loving, unless we are willing to come along side them and help bring them to a better place. It is not enough to believe that our spiritual gift is to tell other people what is wrong with them unless we are both willing to admit our own frailty and be there to help people who are in need of help. So it might be a good thing if our society decided to hang up the prophet mantle for a while because we have not shown that we are capable of using it. We confuse our basest wishes and desires with God’s will. That is not God’s call. Rather God’s call is to love one another as he loves us both this day and forevermore.