

The Minor Prophets: Performers of God's Words

The prophets of the Old Testament were performers: embodying God's message and modelling it in their own lives; adapting older traditions to bring a fresh message to new audiences; using rhetoric and poetry to powerfully shape their words; and encouraging honest responses to God due to an understanding of faith that is active and growing in every generation.

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Scripture taken from *The Holy Bible: (NRSV)*

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
1	<p>An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.</p> <p>A jealous and avenging God is the LORD, the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies. The LORD is slow to anger but great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty.</p>	Nahum 1:1-3a	<p>The prophets of the Old Testament could be described as people performing God's messages in their own lives and bodies. Often, as can be seen here at the beginning of the book of Nahum, their message is described by the word "oracle". The underlying Hebrew word is closely related to the verb "to carry," giving us the idea that the prophets are carrying something heavy or bearing a weighty responsibility. Can you imagine the prophet Nahum feeling overwhelmed by his calling to prophesy against Nineveh – the capital city of one of Israel's most bitter enemies? Yet no clue to his emotions is given as we read through the book of Nahum; only the words of judgement borne by a faithful servant.</p> <p>Are you willing to be God's spokesperson for truth and justice, even when the message is not an easy one to give?</p>	<p>God of justice and truth, give me courage to be your faithful spokesperson in whatever situation I find myself. Amen.</p>
2	<p>Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.</p>	Joel 2:12-13	<p>"Even now..." the Lord's invitation is speaking to us, asking us to turn to God with hearts open to God's grace, mercy and love. God's words through an Israelite prophet now have a universal application, and they are as passionate today as they were when originally spoken.</p> <p>Are you conscious of God's passionate longing to be part of your life? Are you willing to turn again and open yourself to God's steadfast love?</p>	<p>Lord, my God, thank you for your love, grace and mercy. Help me to stay focused on you every day of my life. Amen.</p>

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3	<p>In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.</p>	Micah 4:1-4	<p>About half of the prophetic messages in the Old Testament are a critique of the prophet's own community. These words from Micah are amongst a smaller percentage of messages that gave a vision of a different future: one that included a much wider audience than the original Israelites. Although the centre of Micah's focus was the temple in Jerusalem, he envisaged it as an inspiration for the many peoples and nations who are willing to live under God's guidance. Micah's inclusive words are echoing an earlier prophecy of Isaiah but he adds to the vision of peaceful coexistence between nations. His distinctive image is of social inclusion and economic justice, where "they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees".</p> <p>Do you share Micah's vision for international peace and justice? In what ways are you working towards</p>	<p>God of peace, let me be inspired by this prophetic vision of the day when swords are beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. Let me, in my spheres of influence, tell and act your message of peace. Amen.</p>

The Minor Prophets: Performers of God's Words (continued)

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4	<p>"I am going to bring my servant the Branch. For on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven facets, I will engrave its inscription, says the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day. On that day, says the LORD of hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree."</p>	<p>Zechariah 3:8b-10</p>	<p>200 years later, Zechariah takes Micah's prophecy and slightly alters it in light of new experiences. Not only would they sit under their own vines and fig trees, they would invite each other to join them! What a delightful image of community. The context of this improvised prophecy was an address to the high priest Joshua, perhaps the one originally understood as the "Branch". Later prophets and visionaries improvised that idea to speak of Jesus as God's chosen Branch, the True Vine.</p> <p>When reading the prophets in the Bible, try to develop the habit of reading it on multiple levels. What did the prophet's original audience hear? What did it mean for the New Testament community? What new light does your experience shed on its message?</p>	<p>God of community, let me be willing to share what you have given me so the world may know your love and justice. Amen.</p>
5	<p>The word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying: Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.</p>	<p>Zechariah 7:8-10</p>	<p>Neuroscientists have discovered that human beings are "hardwired" to imitate others. The way others act affects our own performances. If the audience of Zechariah took his words to heart and acted in the way God commanded, society as a whole would benefit greatly. In fact, God was only asking them to imitate the ways of God. The qualities of "kindness" and "mercy" are characteristics that frequently describe God's action in the Old Testament. Relationships between people should mirror God's relationship to us. Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind when he said "Be merciful, just as your father is merciful" (cf. Lev 19:2).</p> <p>Is your life a good model that will influence others? Are you conscious of mirroring God's qualities?</p>	<p>Lord, thank you that you have shown us how to live with each other. May my life reflect your love, mercy and kindness to others. Amen.</p>

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6	<p>And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said,</p> <p>"See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."</p>	Amos 7:8-9	<p>This very familiar image from Amos of a "plumb line" held up as a measure against Israel is probably a mistranslation of a rare Hebrew word. In this case, the word translated "plumb line" sounds like the word meaning "mourn". Rather than measuring the people, God was expecting a response of mourning to the devastation of judgement. But whichever way we translate it, Amos used an ordinary word to function as a sign of God's judgement and a call to an appropriate response.</p> <p>Is your life a sign of God's judgement or God's grace? Do you properly translate your faith for others?</p>	God of justice, help me remember that I am your instrument for translating your love and justice to a needy world. Help me to see with your eyes, to speak with your voice, to act with your love. Amen.
7	<p>Then they cried out to the LORD, "Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you." So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men <u>feared</u> the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.</p>	Jonah 1:14-16	<p>The book of Jonah is different to the rest of the Minor Prophets because it tells a story rather than recording speeches the prophets gave to convey God's messages. We expect any prophet of God to be a faithful model for God's people to follow, but instead Jonah is a model of <i>unfaithfulness</i>. He runs away from God's call, is dragged back in the belly of a fish, ungraciously delivers his message then grumbles when God's graciousness is revealed. In this story, rather than the prophet, God's servants are the fish, the bush, the sun, the wind, and even the pagan sailors. We don't see this readily until we are aware that the Hebrew word for "fear" can also be translated "worship". Earlier in the chapter, Jonah had told the sailors he "worshipped" the Lord (Jonah 1:9). By describing the pagan sailors as worshipping the Lord, offering sacrifices and making vows, the narrator of Jonah tells us <u>they</u> are the model to follow, rather than the Israelite prophet.</p> <p>Are you open to seeing God at work in unexpected places and unexpected people?</p>	God who is Lord of all the earth, if those who have not known you can be awed by your power, how much more should my life honour you. When you call me to be your faithful servant, let me be willing to go where you lead. Amen.

The Minor Prophets: Performers of God's Words (continued)

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
8	<p>God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"</p>	Jonah 4:9-11	<p>The book of Jonah is an intriguing mixture of a humorous story and serious theology. God never gives up on the reluctant prophet – keeping the lines of communication open until the very end of the story. But we never hear Jonah's reply to God's questions. This story is deliberately open-ended. In performance readings of texts the emphasis is on the ongoing activity rather than the completed product. Performances are always in process. As readers of this open-ended story we are invited to answer God's questions as if they are addressed to us.</p> <p>Should not God be concerned for those outside of Israel [or the church]? The lost and confused? The animals? In other words, the whole world? What are you going to do about that?</p>	<p>Lord, thank you for your patience with me. Give me the will and the strength to bring your good news to the world in all its dimensions. Amen.</p>
9	<p>Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.</p>	Zephaniah 3:14-17	<p>Most of the prophetic books are written in poetic form. Like all poetry, meaning is conveyed in succinct phrases and with wonderful imagery. In this poem from Zephaniah, we can trace the ideas to the central core "On that day". In the prophetic books "that day" can be a term of terror – an announcement of judgement. But in these carefully composed words Zephaniah gives a new and positive meaning to "that day" by embedding the phrase right in the middle of a series of repeating ideas that encourage Israel to trust in God, and recognise that God joins us in songs of joy.</p> <p>Is your life centred on trusting God? Do you share joyful moments as well as difficult times with God?</p>	<p>God of joy and song, thank you for this image the prophet has shared: that you rejoice over me with gladness, that you exult over me with singing. May I be worthy of your song! Amen.</p>

The Minor Prophets: Performers of God's Words (continued)

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10	<p>O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted.</p>	Habakkuk 1:2-4	<p>It is encouraging to remember that the prophets were individuals, relating to God in their own way. Whereas Nahum stoically offered God's word with no clue to his inner feelings, in the very next book Habakkuk lays out his bewilderment and frustration in an impassioned cry of lament. The prophet undoubtedly understands himself as the sole righteous individual prepared to name injustice in his tumultuous world, where even the law no longer had any power. God, too, seems inactive. Despite his feelings, the prophet is praying. Because he prayed in the context of his relationship with God, his prayer didn't have to be polite. Prayer in Scripture is by no means always praise of God. Habakkuk could be described as a "faithful dissident", reminding us that questioning God and struggling for answers is as valid a part of the journey as finding them.</p> <p>Are you willing to bring the world's pain before God in prayer?</p>	<p>Lord, Christ, you see us Sometimes like strangers on the earth, Taken aback by the violence, By the harshness of oppositions. And you come to send out a gentle breeze On the dry ground of our doubts, And so prepare us to be bearers Of peace and of reconciliation. (Brother Roger of Taizé)</p>
11	<p>I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.</p>	Habakkuk 2:1-2	<p>Habakkuk has complained about a world where violence rules and God seems indifferent (chapter 1). At the beginning of chapter 2, he claims to have a contribution to make to the conversation. And the following verse suggests that the Lord agrees, because Habakkuk is tasked with sharing the vision publicly, in such a way that anyone can see it.</p> <p>Has it ever occurred to you that God encourages you to observe, question and share your experience of God working in your world?</p>	<p>God whom I love with all my heart, and all my strength, and all my mind, thank you for the gifts of observation and discernment. Help me to use them to find you at work in our troubled world, and to share those insights. Amen.</p>

The Minor Prophets: Performers of God's Words (continued)

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
12	I hear, and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters into my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me. I wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us.	Habakkuk 3:16	As we read the book of Habakkuk carefully, we see that the book begins in the context of turmoil and crisis, and ends without full resolution of that crisis. Indeed, the prophet quakes in fear while waiting for “the day of calamity” at the hands of an invading enemy. But with the beautiful statement of faith that follows we see that the “waiting quietly” is not resignation, but realisation. The prophet who began the journey questioning and complaining has reached a point of recognising God’s hand in events, even in ways that he did not expect. The prophet can embody calm trust in the midst of crisis. Do you experience God’s presence in your life, even in times of turmoil?	Lord, though I am weak, I know that you are strong. When I am fearful, I know that you can save. When I am in turmoil, you are the source of peace. Let me know your strength, your saving grace, your peace. Amen.
13	Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation.	Habakkuk 3:17-18	These poetic words in the last verses of the book of Habakkuk show amazing hope and steadfastness in the midst of suffering. We are unsure whether the prophet was facing the crisis of an enemy invasion, as intimated in the previous verse, or environmental and economic disaster, as suggested in these verses. Nonetheless, the prophet claims a vibrant, living relationship with the Lord that surpasses all circumstances. The prophet has been on a journey of faith which began with an accusation against a God who refuses to save (Habakkuk 1:2) but moved to a place of confidence in “the God of my salvation”. Are you conscious of new visions along your journey of faith? Has your understanding of God grown and changed?	Though the cherry trees don’t blossom and the strawberries don’t ripen, Though the apples are worm-eaten and the wheat fields stunted, Though the sheep pens are sheepless and the cattle barns empty, I’m singing joyful praise to GOD. I’m turning cartwheels of joy to my Saviour God. (Habakkuk 3:17-18, <i>The Message</i>)

The Minor Prophets: Performers of God's Words (continued)

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
14	<p>GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.</p> <p><i>To the leader: with stringed instruments.</i></p>	Habakkuk 3:19	<p>The last verse in the book of Habakkuk is another example of improvisation. Taken from Psalm 18:33 (and also in 2 Samuel 22:34), Habakkuk has added a new dimension to this statement of confident faith with a small change of phrase. In the psalm we read “he set me secure on the heights” but here the prophet affirms “he makes me <u>tread</u> upon the heights”. This is an active verb, more often translated “walk”. The prophet is reminding us that faith is a journey that requires us to keep walking, even while relying on God’s strength. The words that follow are instructions similar to those we see at the beginning of many psalms, suggesting how this book should be recited. The final words in the book are about performance. With the prophets as our model, we can step out on the journey of faithful re-enactment of God’s Word.</p> <p>Is your faith active? Have you thought about how you might re-enact God’s prophetic ministry in your spheres of influence?</p>	<p>God of the prophets, thank you for inviting me into this community of faithful performers of your Word. Continue to teach me and guide me on my journey of faith so that I, too, may faithfully enact your Word every day. Amen.</p>