

Welcome

My friend Myca pointed out that Encanto doesn't have a villain.

Disney villains are almost as popular as the princesses — they even have their own board game. And the animated movie Encanto, available for streaming on Disney+, would seem ripe for villainy. The magical Madrigal family at the heart of the film begins to lose the magic that made them special — surely someone is to blame! But no one lurks in the shadows, twirling a mustache and absconding with magic. Instead, the story of Encanto is one of families, systems, and prophets — one that can serve as a warning and a balm to churches struggling to cope with a changing world.

In an invigorating opening number, Mirabel introduces us to her family. Led by their abuela, Alma, who came (as an undocumented asylum seeker, it's implied) to this new land, each person in the family has a magical ability. Mama Julieta heals people with food and Mirabel's sister (Isabela) conjures flowers, for instance. But Mirabel doesn't have a gift. At her ceremony, when each person's gift is revealed, she receives nothing. What's wrong with Mirabel?

Mirabel begins to notice cracks in the casita, the magical house the Madrigals call home. When she tries to point them out, Alma dismisses her concerns: "There is nothing wrong with la Casa Madrigal. The magic is strong!"

As she dives into the secret of the magic, Mirabel begins to see the cracks in her family. Mirabel begins to suspect that the magic mirrors the health of the family, and the problem is the family's health. She raises this concern to Abuela, who snaps, "I don't know why you weren't given a gift. But it's not an excuse for you to hurt this family."

Abuela's anger is familiar to anyone who's been part of a toxic group — a family, a business, a church. The more established and successful any system becomes, the harder it is to remain open and responsive to change.

Message

Welcome to Fall at Catalyst. Our Fall series is called Black Sheep. We're exploring what happens when our love for God marks us as weirdos, strangers and outsiders. Specifically, we're asking what happens when remaining faithful to God puts us at odds with the larger Church.

The last several years have been difficult for many of us. We've watched people we love - parents, grandparents, grown children, or maybe an influential pastor, deacon or Sunday School teacher from when we were growing up - we've watched many of the very people who taught us who God is and now God loves us become angry, hate-filled and spiteful.

We’ve seen them reject calls for racial justice. We’ve bitten our tongues around meal tables as they repeat fake news about elections or vaccines. We’ve wept as they celebrate and support policies and beliefs that actively hurt people we deeply love.

We’ve heard *non-Christians* lamenting that so few Christians in our culture actually look like Jesus.

It’s enough to make us wonder... are *we* the crazy ones?

Would you believe we’re not the first people to be in such a situation? God’s prophets have a long history of calling God’s people back to faithfulness - in times where the people did not (or would not) acknowledge they were being unfaithful.

That’s not how we usually think about prophets. We think of prophets as fortune tellers. We imagine the prophets to be weird guys in robes offering far-off predictions of what will happen one day.

But that’s not what a biblical prophet does.

The role of a prophet in the Bible is to speak truth to power. God calls prophets to represent God to kings and priest, to the politicians and religious leaders who so often use religion for their own ends. Prophets do sometimes tell the future - we’re going to see that in Jeremiah. But when they do, the focus is still always on the present.

Maybe the best modern example of a prophet telling the future to influence the present is Dr. King’s famous “I have a Dream” speech. He looks forward to a day of racial harmony that clearly exists in the future - half a century later, we still aren’t there. But he wasn’t just telling the future; the dream was a way to call attention to the racial injustices *of his day*. And he gave that speech standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial - a clear message to President Johnson and the rest of the politicians who had the authority to pass anti-racist laws.

[[Jeremiah Timeline](#)] So during this series, we’re going to sit with the prophet Jeremiah. God called him to prophesy in the years leading up to Babylon’s destruction of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The prophets understood Babylon’s oppression - and eventual destruction - of Judah as a direct consequence of God’s people’s refusal to be faithful to God’s covenant. They warned over and over that if God’s people didn’t change their ways, return to loving and serving God, then God would allow Babylon to destroy them.

Well - obviously, they didn’t listen. And that’s why we’re going to try to learn from Jeremiah over the next couple of months. Because we live in a time where faithfulness to God makes us feel like we don’t belong, like the Black Sheep of God’s family.

We need to remember what Jeremiah knew - that faithfulness can bring a sense of alienation even from God’s family.

Turn with us to [Jeremiah 1](#).

We’re beginning with a text we’ve received a few times over the last couple of years. It’s part of Jeremiah’s call narrative. One of the reasons I find it so provocative is that Jeremiah is probably one of the most reluctant of the Hebrew prophets. We’ll see during this series that he *hates* his calling as a prophet - and that’s understandable.

Why?

Well no one likes to be the guy who is telling you to shape up or face judgment. We’ll see several of Jeremiah’s objections over the next several weeks. But I want to start, well, at the beginning. Let’s work through the opening of Jeremiah, and as we do, I want to observe several keys that will be important for our series:

The Lord gave me this message: “I knew you before I formed you in your mother’s womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations.”

“O Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I can’t speak for you! I’m too young!”

The Lord replied, “Don’t say, ‘I’m too young,’ for you must go wherever I send you and say whatever I tell you. And don’t be afraid of the people, for I will be with you and will protect you. I, the Lord, have spoken!” -- Jeremiah 1:4–8 (NLT)

Jeremiah feels wildly underqualified. He complains that he’s far too young to be a prophet.

What makes you feel unqualified to speak for God? Maybe it’s your age. Maybe it’s your lack of knowledge or biblical insight. Maybe it’s your past. Whatever it is, you know how Jeremiah feels, right? That sense of knowing there’s a lot wrong with how God’s people are claiming to follow God right now, and wishing someone would say something.

Can you hear God’s words to Jeremiah? I know you. I made you. My calling is not a mistake. You are the perfect person for this calling. Catalyst, you are the perfect *church* for this calling. Not because of who *you* are, but because of who *I* am.

Then the Lord reached out and touched my mouth and said, “Look, I have put my words in your mouth! Today I appoint you to stand up against nations and kingdoms. Some you must uproot and tear down, destroy and overthrow. Others you must build up and plant.” -- Jeremiah 1:9–10 (NLT)

It’s important that Jeremiah remember this begins and ends with God because God warns Jeremiah his ministry will involve both uprooting/tearing down and building/planting. A prophet’s job is to give a truthful accounting of the state of reality. Some of what the prophet reveals needs to go. We’re going to find weeds and rot. Stuff there’s no saving. It’s just gotta go.

But we’ll also find signs of life - places that need to be nurtured and built on. That, too is the prophet’s job. Both deconstruction and reconstruction. But this can only happen when we ourselves are rooted firmly in who God says we are, and how God sees the world around us.

Song

There are two other things I want to note that are going to be important as we enter into this series. Let’s keep reading:

Then the LORD said to me, “Look, Jeremiah! What do you see?”

And I replied, “I see a branch from an almond tree.”

And the LORD said, “That’s right, and it means that I am watching, and I will certainly carry out all my plans.” Then the LORD spoke to me again and asked, “What do you see now?”

And I replied, “I see a pot of boiling water, spilling from the north.”

“Yes,” the LORD said, “for terror from the north will boil out on the people of this land. Listen! I am calling the armies of the kingdoms of the north to come to Jerusalem. I, the LORD, have spoken! -- Jeremiah 1:11-15

A branch from an almond tree and a pot of water boiling over. These are two provocative images. They stick in your head. We’re going to see this a lot in Jeremiah - and this is a hallmark of all the prophets. They use really tangible, concrete language. Because we want our words to stick, to haunt the listeners. Why? Well that brings us to the last bit of this passage:

“They will set their thrones at the gates of the city. They will attack its walls and all the other towns of Judah. I will pronounce judgment on my people for all their evil— for deserting me and burning incense to other gods. Yes, they worship idols made with their own hands!

“Get up and prepare for action. Go out and tell them everything I tell you to say. Do not be afraid of them, or I will make you look foolish in front of them. For see, today I have made you strong like a fortified city that cannot be captured, like an iron pillar or a bronze wall. You will stand against the whole land— the kings, officials, priests, and people of Judah. They will fight you, but they will fail. For I am with you, and I will take care of you.

I, the LORD, have spoken!” -- Jeremiah 1:15-19

We think Jeremiah’s prophecy is going to be about those nations from the north and their armies, but it’s not. It’s for Judah, Jeremiah’s own people, the very people who give God lip-service while they worship idols.

And God warns Jeremiah they’re *not going to listen*.

Did you get that? It’s not Jeremiah’s job to convince the people. They’re not going to listen (we’re going to talk a lot more about this, friends, believe me). Jeremiah’s job is to bear faithful witness, to communicate God’s truth as clearly and creatively as possible. To prepare for the tearing down/uprooting and keep an eye out for what needs to be planted and built up. His job is to remain faithful in the midst of a faithless people.

Many will not listen until they lose everything. That’s what happens in *Encanto*. Abuela’s abuse of Mirabel destroys the casita. And it’s not until after the casita lies in ruins that Abuela realizes her sin. She apologizes to Mirabel, saying, “I was given a miracle. And I was so afraid to lose it that I lost sight of who our miracle was for.”

Friends, this is the hope of the prophet: that the worst thing is not the last thing. Many of us, like Mirabel, see cracks in the spiritual house that raised us and introduced us to Jesus. We point to entrenched patriarchy, white supremacy, partisan politics, and more.

Are we prepared for the very real possibility that, rather than listen to us, those in charge of the house often ignore, shame, belittle, and even excommunicate?

When Abuela realizes that she, not Mirabel, is the source of the fracture, she apologizes. She weeps, lamenting that the family is broken and she, as the head of the family, is responsible.

Mirabel takes her hand and promises, “Nothing will ever be broken that we can’t fix together.”

Abuela recognizes Mirabel is not a threat to the family, but a gift. It is through her perspective and voice that the family can see its flaws honestly. They can turn out and become a balm to their community once again — a balm that doesn’t destroy them as they serve the world.

The church needs our young prophets. Rather than casting them out, we should listen to them, receive their perspective, and ask them to help us change. In the face of religious leaders and loved ones who refuse to hear the truth, I want to offer you Abuela’s words to Mirabel, “I asked for a miracle and he sent me you.”

Have faith, friends. You are the miracle God has sent to the world.

Communion + Examen

We come to the table in faith.

Where do I find myself at odds with people who claim to speak for God?

What ways do I feel inadequate to speak for God?

How is God calling you to be faithful in the coming week?

Assignment + Blessing

Prepare: what spiritual practices can you commit to in the coming months?