

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany C

February 3, 2019

Church of the Advent

Prophets

Have you ever known anyone you thought of as a prophet? Someone who managed to tell the uncomfortable truth about things, describing things as they are without animosity, without boasting about being *right*, but rather with that hint of hesitation from knowing most people will not see things the same way. The images of people in my life that fit this bill have been older and wiser than I was when I knew them, and incredibly annoying in an uncanny ability to stop me in my tracks and ask if I was sure that what I was doing at the time was the right thing. True prophets are a rare breed and seldom popular with their contemporaries. If they achieve social fame it tends to be as enemies of the State; more often than not they find themselves ignored or silenced. Our lessons today offer us an interesting meditation on prophets--those particular stand-out characters who spoke the words of God to the people of God through their own voices, bringing blessings, warnings and hope for a better life.

The Bible is filled with stories of prophets, and their role was so important that a third of the Jewish Bible is devoted to them, from the Former Prophets including Samuel, and the Latter Prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and 12 others who were not as famous, including Hosea, Jonah, Micah, and several whose names are harder to pronounce. The work of a prophet was not to simply foretell the future, or merely to express righteous indignation at the unjust ways of the world. Rather according to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, a biblical prophet *spoke for God on rights and social responsibilities, criticized immoral acts of Kings, and*

*performed dramatic acts to show God's power.*¹ Some prophets had the ear of kings--at least for a while, while others confronted royalty--such as Moses who won the freedom of the Israelites from the Egyptian Pharaoh. Some prophets--like Elijah--lived under constant threat of their lives for their admonitions to the prevailing rulers to repent and return to right relationship with God.

Biblical prophets were called personally and specifically by God-- Moses by a burning bush, Isaiah by a burning coal touched to his lips, or Jeremiah, formed in the womb and called as a boy to hold God's words in his mouth and to speak them to nations and kingdoms, *to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.* Jeremiah was the prophet sent by God to wake up the Israelites who had gone into exile in Babylon about 600 years before Christ, to offer them the uncomfortable truth that they had brought their failures and shame upon themselves. They had become complacent and domesticated and numb to their enslavement. Jeremiah urged God's people to acknowledge and grieve honestly for their desolation and loss of home and freedom; he encouraged them to express repentance and seek God's forgiveness, and to prepare themselves for liberation and their return to their homeland. A prophet's job is to wake others up from the stupor of oppression, call them to lamentation and remorse, and show them the way home on a redemption road back into the heart of God who was waiting for them.

Our gospel story from Luke that we heard this morning is a continuation of the gospel from last week set in Nazareth. Jesus had recently been witnessed performing signs and wonders throughout Galilee and the stories of his teaching and miracles would have preceded his arrival in his home town. It is not hard to imagine that this news of one of their own becoming famous would have been met in Nazareth with both excitement and skepticism, for we humans tend to

¹ Brueggemann, W. *The Prophetic Imagination*

take in the news of someone we know achieving popular notoriety with a mixture of admiration and envy. Sometimes being almost famous, and the one to stand up in a community to say what needs to be said is not the way to win friends and influence people, but this is the call of the prophet. Jesus certainly met all three criteria as he addressed people's rights and social responsibilities, pointed out and criticized immoral acts of Kings, and performed dramatic acts to show God's power.

In Luke's story, Jesus had gone to the synagogue as was his custom since he was a small boy, and stood up to read from the Prophet Isaiah. When Jesus heard the congregation around him murmuring at his claim to be the one about whom Isaiah was speaking, he quipped, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." Jesus must have been feeling the loneliness of one who speaks against the grain, who names that which others would be more comfortable keeping quiet, who challenges the status quo with a dream of something better-- more loving and more holy. And then he made them *really* mad. He used two stories about the prophets Elijah and Elisha that they would have known--the miracle of the larder of the widow of Zarephath and the healing of Naaman the Syrian general--to warn his home town that they would not necessarily receive special treatment because he was a hometown boy. His message was that God's mercy and healing was meant for everyone, even those who least expected it, and could not be bartered in the ways of the world where personal favors were expected--just because you knew someone who knew someone. Rather Jesus brought the Good News that the liberating love of God is free gift, one that he knew would be ultimately expressed in his death and resurrection--an act of love that would bear, believe, hope and endure all things, for all time, for all people. This loving message of prophesy offered by Jesus so filled his hometown people with

rage at his rejection of their specialness that they would have hurled him off a cliff, had he not slipped out of there and got away. So much for a hometown welcome.

Why would such a message of love and compassion be so despised and rejected? What did they miss in his message? Why could they not see the power of God's gift in Jesus? What a prophet would explain, is that bringing sight to the blind, release to the captives and freedom to the oppressed upsets every social order designed by humanity since the beginning of civilization. People are socially programmed to look out for themselves and their own first, and only then for everyone else with whatever might be left over. We humans spend a lot of energy nursing our fear of one another; our vision is impaired by border walls of our own making on every side. We see suffering everywhere, and are tempted to despair in our powerlessness to affect it. We are not bad or mean people, but can get sucked into the numbness generated by our captivity in a world that is always choosing sides. We want the oppressor overthrown as long as it is not us, or the one who is giving *us* what we need in the moment.

The most important message of the prophets of God is that God's liberating love for us will always be greater than our tendency to forget its power and its salvation. The love of Jesus expressed in his sacrifice will always more than cover the challenges we face in loving one another. And the strength God offers us in the death-overcoming Resurrection will always be greater than the rage inside of us that drives us to push the prophets in our own country off the edge of the nearest cliff. May our prayer this day be to have our eyes and ears opened to recognize the words of liberating love spoken by the prophets in our time and in our lives, those called against all odds to bring us the Good News with all of its joy, hope, peace, freedom and blessing. Amen