

Where Are the Prophets?

Text: 1 Corinthians 14:1-5

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on June 6, 2021

This week's question came to me this way: "Why don't we have prophets and prophecy now? Someone said it was because Jesus was the 'ultimate' prophet." In very broad strokes, I disagree with the premise of the question. I think we do have prophets and prophecy now. And the person who said the supposed lack of prophets was because Jesus was the "ultimate" prophet—presumably meaning that the role is no longer needed—needs to be reminded of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

In First Corinthians, chapter twelve, Paul names prophecy as one of the spiritual gifts available to all Christians. Then, in chapter fourteen, verses 1-5, Paul goes on to stress the importance of seeking that gift. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians roughly two decades after Jesus' death, so if it were true that Jesus voided the need for prophets, Paul would hardly be encouraging people to become prophets here. So I see the real question not as "Why don't we have prophets?" but rather, "Why don't we recognize the prophets in our midst?" And to answer that question, we have to understand what prophets do.

When it comes to cataloging the activity of prophets, the Bible gives us lots of examples. They are male and female, in both testaments of the Bible, and each one goes about his or her work differently. But the core function of all of them is that a prophet is a person who speaks for God. Sometimes they do that in writing, sometimes in speech. There are 17 books of the Bible named for prophets—18 if you count both first and second Samuel, which is only one book in the Hebrew Bible, but two in our Old Testament. A very large percentage of that writing is in poetic form, which is fitting for their often-symbolic messages.

Prophets in the Bible frequently convey God's messages with object lessons of various kinds. Amos used a basket of fruit. Jeremiah had a clay pot, and bought a plot of land just as Israel was being marched off the land into exile in order to give people hope of return. Ezekiel built a tiny model of Jerusalem on a brick and lay in front of it in the middle of the street for the better part of a year to illustrate the siege of that city. Isaiah preached naked to illustrate how Israel would be taken captive. Imagine if they had had social media!

Another interesting thing about the biblical prophets is that they're respected across national and religious borders. The first person named as a prophet in the Bible is actually Abraham. In Genesis 20 God talks to the king of Gerar—a Philistine territory where Abraham is living. In a dream, God tells the king that Abraham is a prophet as a way to get the king to return Abraham's wife, Sarah, who the king had taken. And it works. Sarah is returned with many apologies as the king of Gerar is quite nervous that he may have offended a prophet of Israel.

Which brings us to another thing that distinguishes prophets from other types of people in God's service. Prophets invariably play a role in politics. We'll get into that more in a bit, but in the Bible it's clear that bringing harm to a prophet isn't merely a religious matter. They were viewed across cultures as government officials, and you risked an international incident if you harmed one. In the earliest days of Israel's monarchy, it was the prophet who anointed the king, determining the line of succession.

As time rolled along that role flipped, and it became the king or queen who employed prophets to tell them God's thoughts on everything from crop rotation to war. If a prophet's advice proved especially useful, other nations might actually come seeking them out, which is what happened with the Oracle at Delphi in ancient Greece. Today we tend to consult the Oracle of Omaha more frequently, which raises its own set of questions for another day, but it's arguable that Warren Buffet has as much power today as the Oracle at Delphi ever did.

With Israel's prophets—at least the ones the Bible labels as the “true prophets”—the problem tended to be the reverse. In most cases, those speaking for the God of Israel were trying to rein in bad behavior by Israel's kings or in other ways generally speaking truth to power. I probably don't need to tell you that's not always appreciated. There's a reason that both ancient and contemporary prophets tend to have their lives cut short. Like a lot of things in politics, the court prophets who told the king what he wanted to hear were nicely rewarded. Those who brought messages that called the king to task or otherwise demanded reform or change often didn't fare so well, although there are exceptions.

A few last points about the prophets of yore and then we'll turn to today. Prophets did not always bring harsh or confrontational messages. That's frequently what those in power got, because people with power frequently abuse it. And it was sometimes what the people got if the culture strayed off into idolatry or failed to care for the poor. But it was also the prophet's job to bring God's message of comfort and hope to the people in times of suffering and calamity.

It's from the biblical prophets that we get the vision of the world where the wolf and the lamb lie down together, streams in the desert, mourning turned to dancing, and where a mass grave of dry bones is brought back to life and returned joyously home. Prophets paint the entire picture—they call out sin—the sin of the people, the leaders, or both—they warn of the consequences of that sin; and then, when those consequences play out, they bring hope that God will help them rebuild and start anew.

Lastly, except for the corrupt yes-men in the court of the king, prophets almost universally came to their jobs reluctantly. It was the power of righteous indignation at the violation of moral principles that propelled people out of an otherwise comfortable life to speak out in the public sphere, subjecting themselves to ridicule, abuse, exile, and often death. Nobody wakes up in the morning and thinks, “Yeah, I want to do that!”

But prophets aren't there because that's what they wanted to be when they grew up. They're there because they were called by God to help save a people. Jeremiah called it a fire in his bones and would have gladly been rid of it. But it would not leave him. Moses tried to bow out because he wasn't a good public speaker. Amos was driven to leave a life tending sheep and dressing sycamore trees to bring this charming message from God to Israel,

“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:21-24)

Amos brought that message in a time of great prosperity. That hadn't trickled down, of course, and it was corruption that had enabled that great prosperity. The poor were oppressed, something that a herdsman and agricultural worker like Amos would have noticed. And so he left the sheep and the

trees and went to the halls of power to declare God's disdain for those who went through the motions of following God's ways, but ignored the core of God's message. Amos was kicked out of the country as a result, and we have no idea what happened to him after that.

But we do know what happened to his message. Amos was actually the first person to have a book of the Bible named for him. And about 2500 years later, a minister in a Baptist church in Atlanta also determined that he could not remain silent in the face of oppression. On the night of April 3, 1968 the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a speech saying, "Who is it that is supposed to articulate the longings and aspirations of the people more than the preacher? Somehow the preacher must be an Amos, and say, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Somehow the preacher must say with Jesus, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to deal with the problems of the poor." The next day, Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot dead.

King was a prophet. He not only took God's word right into the White House and shared God's wrath at the political indifference to the oppression of African Americans and the moral complicity of white clergy and churches; he also painted a vision of what the world could be like if we did the hard work of dismantling racism and economic disparity in the United States. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, he described to over 250,000 people a dream where we would all be judged not by the color of our skin but by the content of our character. Millions still turn to his words and legacy for hope and vision.

The call to prophecy is rooted in the moral outrage at injustice combined with God's vision of a world where the distinctions between predator and prey no longer have meaning because we are able to recognize the heart of God in each other. It is always non-violent. And yet prophets have just as difficult a time finding welcome in religious communities as they do elsewhere. Even Jesus got a cool reception when he went back to his home synagogue in Nazareth. That has not changed.

Harvey Milk, the gay rights activist and politician assassinated inside San Francisco City Hall in 1978, once pointed out to *The New York Times* that gay people "go to the bars because churches are hostile. They need hope!" On the night Harvey Milk was shot, Harry Britt, the Methodist minister who succeeded Harvey Milk on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors said, "Harvey was a prophet—he lived by a vision," and that was true. In his most famous version of what would become his "Hope Speech," Milk said, "You have to give them hope. Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope for a better place to come to if the pressures at home are too great. Hope that all will be all right. Without hope, not only gays, but the blacks, the seniors, the handicapped, the us'es, the us'es will give up."

While known best for, and targeted for, his advocacy for gay rights, Harvey Milk also advocated for accessible and affordable child care, free public transportation, and reforming the police. Prophets may have a special passion for one particular cause or another, but they will always lend a voice of support to all those affected by injustice, because they know the truth that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. so well articulated: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere... whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." The flip side of that coin is that if we help to fix any we are helping to fix all of it.

Where are the prophets today? All around us. We don't see them because we are looking for the wrong things. We forget that, during their lifetimes, prophets are seen as agitators, disturbers of the peace. They refuse to stay in the lanes that society sets for them. While they see clearly the danger of a state takeover of religion or of a religious takeover of the halls of power, they also recognize the danger of teaching people that religious and political discourse have no business informing each other. Admonishing church leaders to "not get political" in sermons or other activity while at the same time politicizing basic issues like justice and care for the poor—issues that faith communities have championed for millennia and that are foundational to the sacred texts of every major religion—is a suppression tactic that the prophet sniffs out and calls out in a heartbeat.

Prophets know that being spiritually free doesn't represent full justice for those who remain in political, economic, and social bondage. Prophets take to the streets, but never with violence. They expose corruption wherever they find it, but never employ it themselves—even in defense of a just cause. The more effective they are, the more they will be hated and threatened and, in many cases, neutralized in one way or another.

Saudi Muslim journalist Jamal Khashoggi was a prophet, Russian Christian opposition leader Alexei Navalny is a prophet, American Christian statesman John Lewis was a prophet, voting rights activist and daughter of two Methodist ministers, Stacey Abrams is a prophet. Once you know what you're looking for, you can spot them on the front lines of every battle for equality and justice.

Not all are called to be prophets. It takes a singular kind of courage born of that fire in the bones that Jeremiah described. But Paul describes it as a gift that can be and should be actively sought and nurtured. The prophet is grounded in the keen awareness that injustice, inequality, cruelty, and indifference to the suffering and oppression of others are not only repugnant to God's vision for the world, they prevent it from becoming reality.

Once that awareness seeps into our bones, the words to the old hymn, "I have decided to follow Jesus" take on new and powerful dimensions. The prophet sees not only the footsteps of Jesus, but the Cross to which they lead, and the glorious, resurrected future—not just for individuals, but for the world—that lies beyond. The prophet is determined to follow Jesus and, with every other prophet God has ever called, to gain that future of beloved community for all people, and as the hymn concludes, "no turning back...no turning back." Amen.