

Hearing the voices of the prophets

The sermon is called “Hearing the voices of the prophets”. I will alternate between ancient and contemporary prophetic voices.

“In the beginning of the sixth century, Before the Common Era, Babylon invaded Judah, destroyed much of Jerusalem, interrupted the economy, and deported leading citizens to Babylon; it occupied the land for fifty years. The exquisite poetry of the anonymous prophet known as Second Isaiah emerges in the decades after the invasion like a healing, life-creating song. It seeks to bring back to life a people crushed under a shroud of death.” (Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, page 27)

Comfort, O comfort my people! Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand DOUBLE for all her sins.

The words of a modern-day prophet in Jerusalem came across my computer screen this week. This is a letter from the Reverend Naim Ateek, founder of Sabeel, an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, this liberation theology seeks to deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians, to promote unity among them and lead them to act for justice and peace. Rev. Ateek writes:

During this Christmas Season, we pause to give thanks and praise to the gracious and loving God for the coming of Jesus Christ through whom we have come to know God’s true nature of LOVE. In Christ we know that God’s love extends to all people and embraces all. We know that God wills for people to live in justice and peace with one another. God’s love for humanity culminated in the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem today is desperately in need of the manifestation of God’s love. Jerusalem’s fate is being decided by the powerful, by those who can, who do not realize “what makes for peace”. They do not realize that their power cannot bring peace to the city of Jerusalem.

During this Christmas season, and at the end of another year, it is appropriate to renew our commitment to the work of justice and peace for our Palestinian people by focusing on three essential qualities of our Christian life, namely, FAITH, HOPE and LOVE.

*Our life in the world demands faith. Faith, not only in God, but also faith in ourselves and others, that together with determination and diligence, we can persevere in striving for justice and liberation for the Palestinian people. We also need faith to fight despair, apathy and disappointments. We need faith to realize that we are not struggling alone, but we are laboring with God for the achievement of peace with justice for all the people of our land.

*Our life demands hope. Hope that is not dependent on the ups and downs of the daily changing circumstances. Hope, that is anchored in God, who working in us, will ultimately give us victory over injustice and oppression, and will vindicate truth over falsehood and deceit.

*Our life demands love. Love, not for the gods we create and worship, but the love of the living God; the God who calls us in love to serve one another. Love, especially for our brothers and sisters who are oppressed and suffering from the policies and greed of their fellow human beings, as can be seen in unjust politics and economics.

Amid life's vexing uncertainties, we come to Christmas seeking refreshment and renewal. There is something about a baby with his mother in a humble setting that stirs within us deep thoughts and feelings of faith, hope, and love. May God's love and peace shown at Christmas sustain us throughout the coming New Year.

Now back to the ancient prophet, Isaiah...A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low' the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Jim Wallis is another contemporary prophet. He prepares the way of the Lord by speaking truth to power. Just one month ago, he wrote, "Terrorism: the purposeful violence against *civilians*, non-combatants, with the intent to create and foster social fear. One gun-violence massacre after another has certainly created the fear that our families and children are not safe in their schools, our theatres, our concerts, and even in our churches... I believe these increasingly frequent mass shootings amount to terrorism of our entire populace by the gun industry itself and its principal ally, the National Rifle Association. And there's little doubt that this terror is working. Gun sales keep climbing, and these shootings keep happening. It's time to call out the NRA for what it is: a profiteer of human tragedy. Theologically, the case is pretty clear for anything that reduces violence and saves innocent lives. The Old Testament doctrine of "an eye for an eye" was actually meant to *limit* violence only to that which is proportional. In the New Testament, Jesus takes it further, asking us to love our enemies and proclaiming that "blessed are the peacemakers." Jim Wallis <https://sojo.net/articles/how-nra-enables-domestic-terrorism>

The prophet known to us as the writer of the Gospel of Mark: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

The contemporary prophet, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr speaking at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967. His address was called "Beyond Vietnam," and was delivered to the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam. "This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all mankind. This oft misunderstood, this oft misinterpreted concept... as a weak and cowardly force, has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man. When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I'm not speaking of that force which is just emotional bosh. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality... We can no longer

afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate. As Arnold Toynbee says: 'Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore, the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word.'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

"The good news of Mark's gospel does not begin with a birth story, like in Matthew or Luke...it begins with hearkening back to the words of the prophets. Like a breathless messenger, eager to make an unexpected announcement, Mark has good news to tell and he does it through the voices of Isaiah, Malachi and John, all of whom prepared the way for Jesus." (Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 1, page 45) Here's another contemporary prophetic voice who is also preparing his hearers for Jesus' way... Rev. William Barber, founder of the Moral Mondays protest movement, begun in Raleigh, NC in 2013. He has now founded a movement called the "New Poor People's Campaign", based on the original "Poor People's Campaign, begun by Martin Luther King, Jr. Rev. William Barber:

"If you're going to be in the public square as a preacher, you have to bring something different. So, for instance, you'll never hear me in the public square talking about left and right, and Conservative and Democrat. You have to bring to bear the sacred text in the public square... the first thing is we have to begin to preach the gospel in our churches. Not merely attempt to quarantine the church from the issues in the world but to have the courage, as Karl Barth once said, to hold the Bible in one hand and newspaper in the other. I think too many of our pulpits are disconnected from the realities that people are facing every day... Jesus gives priority and place to the poor, the very ones that Roman society and the religious cultures of that time dismissed and pushed aside. We cannot be silent on the issue, for instance of unarmed black... men, women and children being shot. We cannot be silent and not talk about what the gospel says when we have 14.7 million poor children in this country. We cannot be silent in our pulpits or in our Bible studies when 64 million Americans make less than a living wage... we have to begin to deal with race from the perspective of the gospel, and we have to deal with race not merely as a feeling of prejudice but to unpack for people in the pews that racism is about power. And so we have to dare to preach the gospel. We have to dare like Isaiah to cry out! We have to dare like Jesus to call religious hypocrisy what it is when we major in everything else but love, justice and mercy."

And finally, the words of two great women prophets, one ancient, the other contemporary. Thanks to Jeremy and Katie Mitchell-Koch for making me aware of this piece written by Rachel Held Evans:

It's an unconventional birth announcement. Defiant. Prophetic. Unsentimental. We like to paint Mary in softer hues – her robes clean, hair combed and covered, body poised in prayerful surrender – but this young woman was a fierce one, full of strength and fury. When she accepts the dangerous charge before her, (every birth was risky in those days, this one especially so), rather than reciting a maternal blessing, Mary offers a prophecy:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
According to the promise he made to our ancestors,
To Abraham and to his descendants forever.

When sung in a warm, candlelit church at Advent, it can be easy to blunt these words, to imagine them as symbolic, non-specific, comforting.

But I'm not feeling sentimental this Advent. I'm feeling angry, restless.

And so in this season, I hear Mary's Magnificat shouted, not sung...

In the halls of the Capitol Building. "He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

In the corridors of the West Wing. "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly."

In the streets of Charlottesville. "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts."

Among women who have survived assault, harassment, and rape. "He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed."

Among the poor, the refugees, the victims of gun violence, and the faithful ministers of the gospel who at great cost are speaking out against the false religions of nationalism and white supremacy. "His mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation."

With the Magnificat, Mary not only announces a birth, she announces the inauguration of a new kingdom, one that stands in stark contrast to every other kingdom – past, present, and future –

that relies on violence and exploitation to achieve “greatness”. With the Magnificat, Mary declares that God has indeed chosen sides.

And it’s not with the powerful, but the humble.

It’s not with the rich, but with the poor.

It’s not with the occupying force, but with people on the margins.

It’s not with narcissistic kings, but with an un-wed, un-believed teenage girl entrusted with the holy task of birthing, nursing and nurturing God.

This is the stunning claim of the incarnation: God has made a home among the very people the world casts aside. And in her defiant prayer, Mary – a dark-skinned woman, a refugee, a religious minority in an occupied land – names this reality. God is with us. And if God is with us, who can stand against us?

I hear a lot of professed Christians right now suggesting that it’s okay if powerful men resort to a little lying, bigotry, abuse and misogyny as long as Americans “get to say Merry Christmas again.” Besides the fact that virtually no one in this country has ever been prohibited from saying “Merry Christmas in the first place, such a sentiment stands in blasphemous contradiction to the very doctrine of incarnation we are meant to embrace this time of year.

God did not wrap himself up in flesh, humbling himself to the point of birth in a stable and death on a cross, eating, laughing, weeping, and suffering as one of us, so that I can complain to management when a barista at Starbucks wishes me “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas.” The incarnation isn’t about desperately grasping at the threads of power and privilege. It’s not about making some civic holiday “bigger and better.” It’s about surrendering power, setting aside privilege, and finding God in the smallness and vulnerability of a baby in a womb.

To claim that the lighting of a national Christmas tree each year makes this country “a Christian nation,” while its powerful systematically oppress the poor, turn away refugees, incite violence against religious and ethnic minorities, molest and harass women and girls and call them liars when they dare to speak up, is, in the words of the prophet Amos, SICKENING to God.

“I hate, I despise your festivals,” God says in Amos 5, “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.”

We cannot claim to embrace the Holy Family while withholding justice from those who would most identify with them. We cannot talk of “making Christmas great again” while taking the side of the powerful and violent over the vulnerable.

The season of Advent is meant to be a time of waiting. In years past, I lit candles, sang “O Come Emmanuel,” and pondered in stillness the joy of Christ’s first coming and the hope of his second. But this year I cannot be still. This year hope is hard, belief is hard.

And so I'm waiting with the angst of the prophets, with the restlessness of the psalmist who cried "How long, oh Lord, will You hide your face forever?" and with the stubborn, unsentimental hope of a woman so convinced the baby inside her would change everything, she proclaimed in present tense that the great reversal has already arrived...

The powerful have already been humbled.

The vulnerable have already been lifted up.

For God has made a home among the people.

God has made a home among US.

<https://rachelheldevans.com/blob/unsentimental-advent>