



SUNDAY SERMON

Prophetic Ministry Begins With Us

From time to time the church reminds us about the variety of gifts given to the faithful who make up the Body of Christ. St. Paul writes that our spiritual gifts include ministering, teaching, leading, generous giving, compassionate helping, and faithful prophesying. (Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12).

As we look at the St. Columba's website to learn who leads our various ministries, we can see many that correspond with the spiritual gifts Paul is taking about.

But nowhere does it indicate who is in charge of prophecy. We don't have a Prophet in Residence and as far as I know, prophecy is not part of the skill set we look for in prospective staff or vestry members. When asked to name our gifts, prophecy is not one we're likely to mention, and the word makes many Christians uncomfortable. We are wary of anyone who claims to speak for God.

The great prophets of the Hebrew Bible are blessed with special awareness of God's involvement in the world and God's anguish about the way we often live. But they are not about to win any popularity contests. Prophets can be inspiring for us to read about but were probably not easy to travel with. No society wants to be scolded about its moral shortcomings.

And biblical prophets were especially unpopular with politicians. Kings were anointed to preserve the nation's covenant bond with God, but they usually focused on preserving their own power. Kings did not treat kindly the prophets who called them out for ignoring God's purposes.

Today we hear of two divine messengers—Amos and John the Baptist—who get into trouble for speaking truth to power.

Amos preaches during a period when Israel is enjoying relatively peaceful and prosperous times. But measuring the nation's moral integrity with a "plumb line" God finds it to be hopelessly deficient. Traveling with Amos we would notice that a few people are enjoying prosperity while most struggle in poverty. Amos lashes out against a corrupt system that allows a group of elites to live in comfort while oppressing the poor.

Our travels with Amos bring us to the holy shrine of Bethel, which means House of God. Yet this shrine has been made a royal place of worship, a house of the king. Here, we would expect Amos to tone down his rhetoric a bit so as not to antagonize those in charge.

But instead of proclaiming God's approval of the way the nation is being run, Amos boldly announces God's intention to destroy the king and allow Israel to be sent into exile as punishment for casting aside the values of God.

His sermon does not go over well with the king's priest, Amaziah. He orders Amos to go back where he came from-- to earn his living prophesying

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Eighth Sunday after
Pentecost
Sunday, July 15, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. David Griswold

somewhere else. There is only room in Bethel for prophecy that makes the king feel secure. Amos's vision is too bleak for the nation to bear.

Eight centuries later another king, Herod, is rattled by prophetic ministry that defies the status quo. John the Baptist has attracted a following by calling for spiritual renewal in a culture where God's vision of community has been abandoned. He points to Jesus as the agent of God's boundary-crossing love. But Jesus' teaching about a new kingdom is threatening to those who are invested in the present one. Herod is concerned about the growing Jesus movement and fears Jesus is John, murdered by Herod and now risen from the dead.

Like Amos, John is not intimidated by royalty. He has condemned Herod for violating Jewish marriage laws, and for this John has been arrested though not executed—the gospel of Mark tells us Herod knows John to be “a righteous and holy man” (6:20).

But John is expendable: his holiness is no match for Herod's pride when the king makes a drunken boast at his birthday banquet. And so John is not merely executed but beheaded. Mark shows us the depth of corruption to which the society's ruling elites have sunk. If this man of God can fall victim to such savagery, what fate awaits the next holy messenger who challenges those in power?

Prophetic work is risky, even dangerous. Yet despite evil's power to overwhelm the word of God, prophetic speech cannot be stopped. From the depravity of Herod's banquet for the powerful, the very next episode in Mark is the loaves and fishes miracle, God's banquet for the powerless.

We live in a world in which Jesus' vision of God's kingdom remains both reliably at hand and yet not within our reach. A prophet insists that we orient our worldview to the relationship God yearns to have with us, not to the priorities and prejudices our culture imposes. This might mean looking inward at our own excessive self-concern and mistrust of others, and looking outward at the prevailing systems that can block the promises of God from reaching all people.

We know modern prophets. We honor 20th century Christian martyrs such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King and Archbishop Oscar Romero. They dared to insist that the social and political order should reflect the justice of Jesus. We can look at such figures and feel small. It can seem as if there is little we can do to make the gospel vision our social reality.

Perhaps we wish an Amos or a John the Baptist would rise up right now and galvanize public opinion against a leader whose policies often seem to be an affront to the God we believe in, and set lasting changes in motion.

But do we have to wait for a new charismatic leader to inspire us? Since the day of our baptisms we have been traveling in the company of a prophet. And as risky as that can be, we, like the disciples, can still carry on Jesus' prophetic work.

Our prophetic speech begins every time we pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We live in a prophetic spirit every time we refuse to allow “otherness” to get in the way of the relationships we form—otherness based on any factor that sorts people into categories. Categories do not exist in God's realm.

We must be ready to be both the bearers and the receivers of prophetic speech that can be unsettling and unpopular. Prophetic voices in the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements have drawn our country's attention to the persistent evils of systemic racism and abuses against women.

We engage in prophetic speech when we press the powerful to promote justice. Like Amos and John, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is not intimidated by royalty. He spoke lovingly and yet prophetically at the recent royal wedding, to remind all followers of Jesus that our mission is to make God's unconditional love a

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reality in all places. And he calls us to the Reclaiming Jesus movement to advocate for the poor in the public square.

While we practice or support prophetic speech, we here at St. Columba's also engage in prophetic ministry that enacts the kingdom vision we talk, sing and pray about. Prophetic ministry is part of everything we do here, and Jesus is our prophet in residence.

Two months ago, many of us gathered in the Great Hall for a Sunday forum to begin planning a new phase of prophetic ministry. Our Outreach Vision Task Force is engaged in discerning how and where this parish can be an agent of change in our city, in settings where racism and poverty are blocking God's vision of community.

That Sunday forum drew forth some of the concern, frustration and even shame many of us feel about systems that perpetuate inequality all around us. But it also yielded a fountain of energy, insight and hope about the ways in which we might disrupt those systems and offer an alternative reality grounded in the love and justice of God.

As the visioning group devotes a year to discerning a new project, the vital prophetic witness of this community will continue. We must never assume that prophesying is someone else's job. God isn't waiting for professional oracles with "prophecy" listed on their resume.

After all, the king's priest gets it wrong when he tells Amos to go make his living as a prophet somewhere else. Amos already has a day job! He is "a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees" taken by the Lord to prophesy to God's people (7:15).

If an amateur like Amos can muster the time, conviction and eloquence to speak God's truth to a troubled world, there is no limit to what we can do as prophetic ministers together.

Thanks be to God.