

The Work of Prophets

On this fifth Sunday in the season of Lent, as we draw nearer to Holy Week, our readings and the Holy Spirit invite us to wonder what prophetic work might be calling our name. The people in the crowd that gathered in Jesus' hometown were **astounded** at the prophetic things they heard him say. To be astounded is to be greatly surprised by what you witness – affected enough that the encounter leaves you wondering. As disciples patterning ourselves after Jesus, will we astound neighbors in our time with good news?

With eyes open or closed, let's be together in a moment of prayer. Holy Loving Spirit, we are grateful for this time to be freely gathered – on the live stream and on this land – loved by First Nations and others across time and where we are now weaving our way of community. Lead us from gratitude into holy curiosity. Open our senses, our mind, our souls to the call of your true and loving voice in our lives. We pray this as followers of our great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

Fellow sojourners, what IS the work of a prophet? It is often stated succinctly that a prophet is one who speaks truth to power. A prophet speaks or shows what is true (in the sense of real factor at play in human and Earth community) even when it will be met with defensiveness by those who are content with the status quo.

When we gathered this past Wednesday for Connecting with the Word, our midweek text study, we surfaced times when we had said or done something prophetic (be it in private or public space) – articulating or laying bare a truth or reality that was not likely to land easily but rather to cause healthy discomfort. **I invite you to wonder this morning in what relationship or space you need to articulate or lay bare an uncomfortable reality-based truth.**

Let's turn to our gospel reading for what it can teach us about the work of prophets. A powerfully prophetic moment upsets the apple cart – enough so that the moment does not typically slide by without impact. We heard Jesus' neighbors – likely both his childhood peers and those who had helped raise him – escalate in their astonishment.

“Where did this man get all this?” they asked. “What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.”

An all too common move we make when confronted with truth telling is to take offense at what is laid bare. In Jesus' case, he was following in the tradition of his powerfully prophetic cousin, John – continuing a spiritual movement that called for repentance and openness to reform (both personal and societal reform). And taking offense (considering a truth teller's offering a personal attack) often precipitates us puffing up with defensive posture, leaving no room for further input, and disengaging.

I am saddened by this summary of what resulted from the defensiveness and disengagement. We heard, *“And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.”*

We know of Jesus' great power to heal and share wisdom. We know this from all the stories shared about him – whether by writers allowed into the biblical cannon or those who were left on the margins to be discovered many hundreds of years later. *“He could do no deed of power there.”* Jesus had great capacity, but the possibility of his work alongside his hometown neighbors was blocked by their rejection of him. So Jesus moved on to share his gifts in surrounding Gallilean villages.

Now, as he commissioned his twelve closest disciples, sending them out with his message of healing, repentance and forgiveness of sin, Jesus offered instruction based on his own experience of rejection: *“Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.”*

Jesus’ instructions sound harsh to most of our ears. Yet he sensed that time was short for their generation of the movement love-based justice in which the first shall be last and the last shall somehow be first – a society with abundance enough for all to share. Jesus encouraged the disciples to engage with people who were open to an exchange of ideas. But Jesus also knew, in the short time available to them in their lifetimes, they would not do well to bang their heads against the wall by attempting to influence people impervious to their teachings. **I wonder, is there someone with whom you have crossed paths in this lifetime with whom you have needed to cut ties (or at least agree to not talk about matters of ultimate importance) because you are simply not open to each other’s perspectives?** It is a kind of loss we grieve – but sometimes a necessary and healthy loss. And yet, what about all those who need to hear Jesus’ life-affirming and life-saving message of grace? Will we be brave enough to continue to pursue sharing that?

I’ve asked questions that are mostly about being prophetic in our personal lives. This Palm Sunday offers us a glimmering, shining opportunity to be prophetic in the public square. Have you ever found yourself thinking this? *“Gosh, I wish my friends and neighbors could see that the more fundamentalist Christians who are propping up the current political tyranny (with their ideas about God ordaining it) are not the only kind of Christian.”* Well, next Sunday is a huge opportunity for thousands of us to show our neighbors that kind of Christian *en masse* when we gather to process to the capitol for Palm Sunday Faith Action: Reclaiming Christianity in the Public Square.

My sister-in-law Martha is, like me, a pastor in a local church. Her context is Minneapolis. Martha is a core leader in the ISAIAM interfaith movement for a strong multiracial democracy. She recently shared two brief stories that inspire her to participate in our Palm Sunday Faith Action at the capitol in St. Paul.

March 24th is Oscar Romero's commemoration day – on the anniversary of the day in 1980 when he was shot and killed while presiding at mass. Martha describes the context in this way: *“During violent repression in El Salvador, his sermons were broadcast on the radio across El Salvador. In those sermons he named the names of people who had been killed by the government and the names of people who had been disappeared. In his last broadcast the day before he was murdered during mass, he urged soldiers to defect, to lay down their weapons and refuse to kill their own brothers and sisters.”*

Romero offered these words of encouragement to the people on January 27, 1980: *“I repeat what I told you once before when we feared we might be left without a radio station. God's best microphone is Christ, and Christ's best microphone is the church, and the church is all of you. Let each one of you, in your own job, in your own vocation – nun, married person, bishop, priest, high school or university student, day laborer, wage earner, market woman – each one in your own place live the faith intensely and feel that in your surroundings you are a true microphone of God.”* Words from the late Bishop Oscar Romero. Friends, how will we each and together be microphones for the Love of God?

Martha shares another story, noting that we are currently in the 61st anniversary of the March 21st-25th Selma to Montgomery march, which was the third attempt to get from Selma to Montgomery – a pivotal moment in the struggle for a multiracial democracy that led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act. Martha tells the story this way:

“I met a woman named Judy last year in Selma, AL – a white woman in her 60s, who had made the pilgrimage to Selma in honor of her mother who was part of the Selma to Montgomery march in 1965.

Judy remembers watching their black and white TV during dinner and remembers the night when Bloody Sunday was on the news. Seeing John Lewis, and so many other peaceful marchers, beaten brutally disturbed them all deeply.

The next morning at breakfast, Judy (first grade) said to her mom - “Mom, we have to do something.”

When Dr. King invited people of faith and good will across the nation to come down to Selma and march, Judy’s mom decided she was going. This was NOT an easy thing for her – She was a single mom who worked as a waitress, without family around. But she was determined to go, and to do something. She got a friend to agree to watch the girls for a week or two or however long it took. She took the bus from Montana where they lived all the way to AL.

Judy remembers her mother coming home from that trip and meeting her at the bus station. She told me “I’ll never forget it – when she stepped off that bus, I saw that my mother’s face was glowing. She had been in the sun all week on that march and had a beautiful tan, but it wasn’t just that – her eyes were shining, and her whole body was radiant.” A story from Judy, shared by Pastor Martha Bardwell.

Friends, God’s Love is calling us in our time to show up publicly to radiate the truth of love-based justice for all. This is our prophetic moment.

In her devotional piece “Hometown Prophet,” Jenifer Ruth Lynn Garrison articulates prophetic qualities of climate activist Greta Thunberg, writing this:

“Millions of people admired her fierce courage and unwavering ability to speak truth to power... she is a prophet, one who speaks even when she receives at best advice to ‘just tone it down,’ and at worst death threats.”

May we tap into the fierce courage that is our spiritual birthright as Jesus followers. May we speak truth to oppressive power. Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Mark 6:1-32, "Hometown Prophet"