

May 28, 2023

The Day of Pentecost

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“Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets!”

This is Moses’ response to Joshua’s complaining and protesting because Eldad and Medad were prophesying — in the opinion of some — in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and even as the wrong people. It seems to ring true that, as Jesus would later say in the Gospels, no prophet is accepted in their hometown.

To begin, what is prophecy, anyhow? Whom do we regard as prophets? And, what might a prophetic life look like in the here and now, for you and me? These are three questions I’d like to explore together with you all this morning.

So first, what exactly is prophecy? For some, to prophesy is simply to accurately predict future events. I think of the various documentaries I’ve watched on the History Channel about Nostradamus or the Mayan Doomsday Calendar. Maybe your mind jumps to the psychics of Salem, Massachusetts who claim to be able to tell our own futures. For others, the term ‘prophecy’ evokes images of fiery figures like Amos and John the Baptist, calling people to repentance. People often think of prophecy as being adversarial or controversial, maybe even self-righteous, but as Philip Wogaman reminds us in his book on prophetic preaching, the word in its Greek form refers simply to one who speaks on behalf of another. In Hebrew tradition, a prophet, then, is one who speaks for God. Prophetic preaching, specifically, is often considered the kind of preaching that “get ministers in trouble,” addressing significant social issues and concerns. What do you think of when you hear the word ‘prophecy?’ What is ‘prophecy’ for you? I invite you to keep these questions in the back of your mind this morning.

Guiding question number two: Whom do we regard as prophets? If you are a Harry Potter fan like me, you might

imagine a figure like the eccentric Professor Sybill Trelawney, teacher of Divination at Hogwarts, who uses crystal balls and reads tea leaves in order to tell the future. But, what about those figures not found in books or the Bible? What about the man on the Boston Common with the sign that reads “Repent — the end is near!” Is he a prophet? Are people prophets just because they claim to be? What is the litmus test to determine who is a “real” or “true” prophet? How do we know? We have, of course, modern-day prophets to look to as well: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., William Barber II. Whom might you consider a modern-day prophet? Of course, the biggest problem with modern-day prophets is what do we do when we disagree with them or when they are wrong. A *New York Times* headline from February 2021 read: “Christian Prophets Are on the Rise. What Happens When They’re Wrong?” Then we have Moses, who wished that all God’s people were prophets...

Finally, and I want to spend the most time unpacking this question this morning, what might a prophetic life look like in the here and now, for you and me? What does the prophetic life look like? I want to offer a few definitions and suggestions to help us think about this together. First, again from Philip Wogaman, a Christian ethicist who served for many years as pastor of Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C., famed spiritual home of the Clintons during their White House years. For Wogaman, “to be told that your life is of great value to God is deeply prophetic.” The prophetic life, by extension, sees and honors other people as truly beloved children of God. The singular most important task of the prophetic life, for Wogaman, is to speak to the marginalized, oppressed, and forgotten that their lives matter. As we approach the beginning of Pride Month, the month of June, I remember how this definition of prophecy and the prophetic task rings true in my own life. In college, I found myself struggling with what it meant to be a faithful Christian and also to be gay. I had long sensed God’s call to be a pastor, but it wasn’t until 2009 (my senior year of high school and first year of college) that LGBTQ+

people were permitted to be ordained in the Lutheran church in the United States. So, I was still grappling with what my identity meant for my own life of faith and sense of call. But, onto the scene came the Rev. Dawn Adamy, a Presbyterian minister. When I doubted most that my life mattered, she spoke to me the deeply prophetic truth that my life was indeed of great value to God. I largely credit Dawn for being the reason that I am standing here before you today as pastor, priest, and maybe even prophet.

Another Dawn, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, offers this definition of the prophetic life: "In accordance with the prophetic tradition of Israel and the ministry of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Scriptures, [prophecy] may be understood as divinely inspired speech enlivened by the Holy Spirit in the gathered community of faith." This was certainly the case for our readings from Acts this morning, which tells the story of the first Day of Pentecost. The takeaway that this definition offers us is that the Holy Spirit is a key player in, maybe even the MVP of, the prophetic life. It is the Holy Spirit that inspires, guides, and directs prophets. Without the Holy Spirit, we might as well be like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, as St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians concerning the gift of love. In the prophetic life, we are partners with the Holy Spirit in speaking for God. From Jesus' own prophetic life, Ottoni-Wilhelm distills three essential elements: prophecy voices God's passion for others, prophecy proclaims the promises of God, and prophecy points the way to new possibilities. Passion, promises, and possibilities. These are hallmarks of the prophetic life that all of us can grab ahold of.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann offers an important addition to these hallmarks of the prophetic life for us to consider in our own lives. For Brueggemann, prophetic witness is about seeing and perceiving the world as God sees it, and allowing our hearts to break over the things that break God's heart. Allowing our hearts to break over the things that break God's heart. What breaks the heart

of God? Have you ever thought about that? Jesus, after all, wept when his friend Lazarus died. Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem. Jesus cried out on the cross. Clearly, God's heart is capable of breaking, just like ours. What breaks God's heart today? Our failure to honor the image of God in one another and in ourselves? Our use and misuse of God's creation? Our disdain for those who are different from us? The starting point for our own prophetic lives is to take the heavenly view, as it were. We must start by seeing the world as God sees it, and allowing our hearts to break open along with God's heart. The prophetic life is rooted in a deep compassion for God's creation and all that is therein.

One last definition of the prophetic life comes from Cornell West, professor and scholar in the field of African American studies. He writes: "Prophetic witness consists of human acts of justice and kindness that attend to the unjust sources of human hurt and misery. Prophetic witness calls attention to the causes of unjust suffering and unnecessary social misery. It highlights personal and institutional evil, including the evil of being indifferent to personal and institutional evil." There is so much for us to consider in this one definition alone. First, prophetic witness consists not only of human acts of justice, but also of kindness. Kindness! Have you ever thought of kindness as a prophetic act before? In our day and age, I would have to agree with West that there is something deeply prophetic about the simple disposition of kindness. Next, prophetic witness calls attention to the causes of unjust suffering and unnecessary social misery. In this way, the prophetic life is about truth-telling. Prophecy, as opposed to ideas mentioned earlier about predicting the future, has to do with naming injustices and suffering in the world. "Would that all the LORD's people were prophets!" What if we all took this admonition to heart? The world might indeed be a better, kinder, more just and more peaceful place if we all had the courage to call out injustice wherever we see it. If you had a pulpit for a day, what injustices would you name in the world? Where would you direct our attention and concern?

Whom might you speak on behalf of? What pain would you seek to alleviate? And finally for West, prophetic witness highlights personal and institutional evil, including the evil of being indifferent to those evils. I immediately think of the words of our confession of sin which we speak together during many seasons of the church year: we confess that we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone... Sin and evil are manifest not only in thoughts, words, and deeds, but also in our indifference and lack of action.

I've walked us through three questions this morning: What is prophecy? Whom do we regard as prophets? And, what might a prophetic life look like in the here and now, for you and me? I hope at least one of these thoughts or definitions has been inspiring for you as you consider prophecy, prophets, and the prophetic life. But I also want to leave you with some practical insights as you go from this place, this Day of Pentecost, back out into your lives in the world. How do we actually do any of this?

Nora Tubbs Tisdale, who was my own professor at Yale for a course titled "Prophetic Preaching," offers us four things to consider as we prepare to live prophetic lives. Number one: "we will need to be in prayer, open to the Spirit's guidance..." Prophets have their beginning and ending in prayer. We cannot hope to speak for God, see the world through God's eyes, or have our hearts break with God's heart if we do not spend time daily in prayer, open to the Holy Spirit. This Day of Pentecost, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit into the world and into our lives, we must trust that same Spirit to be our guide. Without prayer and without the Spirit's guidance, we cannot hope to live authentic prophetic lives. I suggest that this week, your continual inner prayer as you go about your days be this: "Come, Holy Spirit, come!" Or, if you prefer the Latin which we sang as today's sequence hymn, "Veni, Sancte Spiritus!"

Second: "If we are going to engage in prophetic acts, we will need to place ourselves intentionally in contexts where

our hearts continue to be broken by the things that break the heart of God.” This one is, perhaps, the most challenging of Tisdale’s suggestions. Who wants to intentionally and regularly be uncomfortable and heartbroken? This seems like a big ask, a big sacrifice even. But, it is totally necessary. We cannot live in a bubble and expect to live a prophetic life. We must allow our hearts to be broken, over and over again, but more specifically to be broken open, receptive to the sufferings, pains, needs, hopes, and dreams of others.

Thirdly: If we are going to engage in prophetic acts, we will need wisdom and discernment regarding which actions might be most effective in bringing about change. Wisdom, the first spiritual gift mentioned in Isaiah 11, a gift invoked at our baptisms and confirmations, coveted throughout history as that which is most to be sought after. We need wisdom to be prophets. And, we need discernment concerning how we might bring about change. The prophetic life does not maintain the status quo, rather, it catalyzes change. That is probably the reason why prophets are seen by many as so threatening. They advocate for change. We all know change is inevitable, and yet, so many of us fear and even hate it, especially when it means that our own privilege or social standing might be affected.

And finally, Tisdale tells us, “if we are going to engage in prophetic acts, we will need to be surrounded by communities of faith and support who pray with us and for us, who dance and rejoice with us... and who... speak to us of the hope that also lies at the heart of God’s prophetic gospel.” We need to be surrounded by a community of faith that prays with us and for us. That is ninety-nine percent of why I come to church — how about you? Do you draw strength from this community, from its members, and from its prayers? I hope you do! And I hope that the support of this community of faith inspires you to go forth and prophesy. The world needs your prophetic witness to the Gospel. Now, more than ever, the world needs you to be harbingers of hope. The world needs hope that in the strength of God,

all things are possible. Hope that new life can spring forth in the face of death, hope that goodness is stronger than evil, hope that love is stronger than hate.

With Moses, my prayer this Day of Pentecost is that all might be the LORD's prophets! Amen.