

## GLORIA NAYLOR'S HILL OF DISBELIEF

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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How are prophets to be honored in their own hometown? In the fifth chapter of Mark's gospel, Jesus demonstrates his divine powers along the shores of the Sea of Galilee by calling demons out of a suffering man, by curing chronic hemorrhaging in a woman, and by bringing a twelve year old girl back from death. Then in Chapter Six he returns to his hometown, Nazareth. As he begins to teach in the synagogue people question his wisdom and his so-called "deeds of power." "Where did this man get all this? Is this not the carpenter? ...And they took offense at him."<sup>i</sup> Jesus explains the phenomenon of rejection by saying that prophets are not honored "in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."<sup>iii</sup>

Likewise, the prophet Ezekiel was dishonored in his hometown -- or rather, by all of the Israelite people. In his original commissioning as a prophet, God says to him, "I am sending you to the people of Israel, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God'... Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them... Do not be afraid of them... though briars and thorns surround you and you live among scorpions."<sup>iiii</sup>

To understand this treatment of prophets, and to bring it up to date for our time, I'd like to discuss a novel with you today by Gloria Naylor called Linden Hills. She describes an apparently ideal modern suburb somewhere in these United States, built generations ago by an African American developer and populated now by well-educated, successful, wealthy black people. It consists of a series of eight circular drives, ringing the hill, and the family of the original developer still has considerable control over the subdivision. The residents are not kind to prophets among them. They need them badly, however -- as we all do.

One of the prophets within the community is a minister named the Rev. Michael T. Hollis. He'd been a star athlete in college, and then, with the intellectual and personal qualifications to succeed at virtually any career he wanted, he'd gone on to the Harvard Divinity School. He'd experienced a powerful Ezekiel-like call to ministry, and that was that. There's a wonderful funeral scene in the book where Rev. Hollis is reminding his Linden Hills parishioners that no one is prepared for death: "But death comes. Yes it comes. It comes sneaking up -- all quiet and soft... It knows no occupations. No rich or poor." Then he gets more specific, and more down to earth with his own congregation: "Are you ready for death?... Will the fancy homes, fancy clothes and fancy cars make you ready? Will the big bucks and the big jobs make you ready?"

Didn't make Lazarus ready. Didn't make Mary and Martha ready. Even if they had had all those things, they weren't prepared."<sup>iv</sup> Rev. Hollis then goes on to explain how we may never be ready for death, but we can be ready for resurrection into eternal life: "If your heart is right. If your heart is with God... Sister Parker will be ready [when Jesus calls her]...because here was a woman with her heart in the right place."<sup>v</sup>

Then the scion of the real estate development family, named Luther Nedeed, mounts the pulpit to give a eulogy: "Luther smiled. Turning toward the congregation, he began to read. 'Lycentia Sarah Parker was born in 1915. Her union with Chester Philip Parker was blessed with no children, but she is survived by him and a host of devoted nieces and nephews who...' There was a sigh of relief in the chapel as Luther's even monotone soothed their ears. His voice droned on and on. 'She was an outstanding member of her community, giving her time and energy to serve as coordinator of the Linden Hills Beautification Project, secretary of the Tupelo Realty's Neighborhood Board, co-sponsor for...' Their relief had become gratitude. They straightened up in the pews and leaned toward his words. And when he was through, the silent applause for this performance was deafening as he nodded to [Rev.] Hollis. Luther Nedeed had just placed Lycentia Parker's life into the hands of a savior they could understand...That was the gospel they wanted to hear under...[the church's] gold-leafed ceiling."<sup>vi</sup>

The story continues as the warmth in Rev. Hollis' body drains, "leaving a chill that caused him to tremble... He could see the real faces in front of him quite clearly now as they waited -- some tense and others amused. He knew they weren't waiting for the Right Reverend Michael T. Hollis, because all those eyes held an edge of contempt."<sup>vii</sup> The reader learns before the end of the chapter that through all the struggles of his Linden Hills ministry the Rev. Hollis has developed a serious problem with alcohol, and an ulcer, and is now divorced from his Harvard Business School-trained wife. A prophet is not honored in his own hometown.

Another character in the novel is Lester Tilson. His grandmother was one of the few people in Linden Hills to see what kept happening to so many people in the community. She said they kept selling to the highest bidder the silver mirror that God propped up in their soul. By that she meant "giving up that part of you that lets you know who you are."<sup>viii</sup> The book is full of colorful stories of people like this: There's Maxwell Smythe, a Dartmouth graduate, now an executive at General Motors, whose advice about work and life was to "keep it all inside" and who carried on the most obsessive-compulsive existence imaginable.<sup>ix</sup> There's Laurel Dumont, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Berkeley, who was on the front page of the New York Times business section before she was 25, an executive at IBM with a beautiful Linden Hills home and silver Mercedes, who commits suicide by diving into her empty swimming pool one winter when it becomes clear she has no real relationships with anyone.<sup>x</sup> Winston Alcott is a thirty year old gay man forced into marriage with a woman he doesn't love in order to keep up appearances and save his career with a major law firm.<sup>xi</sup> Lester Tilson's 27-year old sister Roxanne, a Wellesley graduate working for an advertising agency, is involved with a marketing vice-president for

General Motors who thinks she's too fat (or "full" as he puts it) and in a committed relationship will divert too much of his attention from his career, even as he feels as if he's falling in love with her.<sup>xii</sup>

Lester and a childhood friend named Willie are poets, and throughout the book they do odd jobs together around Linden Hills to support their passion for writing. Lester is another prophet, but he's not honored in his hometown. He sees the underside of what's going on in Linden Hills, and he names it. He has perspective as well on the power of white privilege and the modicum of black success represented by Linden Hills. For his powers of prophetic analysis he's rewarded by responses like this one from Maxwell Smythe: Lester "has one foot in the ghetto and the other on a watermelon rind."<sup>xiii</sup>

There's one more prophet who impressed me in the book. Her name is Ruth Anderson and she's described as a woman "whose beauty seemed to go down to the bare bone."<sup>xiv</sup> Ruth used to live in Linden Hills, but refuses to go back, because, as she puts it, "those people just aren't real." She agrees with Lester's analysis that "they eat, sleep and breathe for one thing -- making it. And making it where?"<sup>xv</sup> Meanwhile, she's married to Norman, a man who has a severe mental illness -- perhaps bipolar disease or psychosis, where he's wonderfully attentive and loving much of the time, but periodically has dangerous hallucinatory episodes. Ruth and Norman call them "the pinks." At those times Norman runs around screaming and tearing at his face and hair with his fingernails, trying to scrape off the pinks, until he's constrained and escorted to a mental hospital. Many people wonder why Ruth stays with Norman, since he inevitably destroys everything in their apartment at those times, trying to find something that he can break and use to try to scrape his skin clean. Yet, their love is so strong, and he's so caring and nurturing of her, that she stays with him through thick and thin. There'd been one incident she'd never forget when he returned home from work just as the pinks were coming on and found Ruth seriously ill with an internal inflammation. His courage in fighting off the pinks as he got her a glass of water and medication when she couldn't leave her bed -- that level of courage and love -- affected her for life.

She was regularly made fun of and deprecated by members of her hometown. Yet, her prophetic message to the people of Linden Hills is one of the primacy of love. She remains a close friend of Laurel Dumont's up to the time of Laurel's suicide.<sup>xvi</sup> She watches out for Lester and his friend Willie, finding them work and protecting them from the police when they seemed to be vagabonds in Linden Hills.<sup>xvii</sup> And she remains emblematic to all those people she left in Linden Hills when she moved to a poor neighborhood on its border. They had to keep asking themselves what she had found to make her so fulfilled when they were feeling so alienated from themselves, from others, and from the world so much of the time.

So, in conclusion, what makes a prophet, what do they do for us, and how can we honor them in our own hometowns? In essence, to be a prophet is to challenge the status quo, reminding the

rest of us that we can do much better. Rev. Michael T. Hollis challenges the efficacy of fancy clothes, homes and cars by presenting a vision of a heart in the right place. Lester Tilson challenges the false self-understanding that is so prevalent in Linden Hills, asking people instead to treasure and use the silver mirror that God has propped up in their souls. Ruth Anderson challenges the constant pursuit of the carrot -- the desire to make it -- with a demonstration of the power of love.

Why are prophets so dishonored, especially in their hometowns? Because they shake our complacency and sense of security. Because they make us feel guilty and ashamed. Because they ask us to give up our attachment to material possessions which have so charmed and beguiled us. And because, most galling of all, they claim to speak in the name of God, or at least in the name of capital T truth and capital L love.

When prophets come from our hometowns, we think we know them and their place. We have a pigeonhole for them. They should know where they stand in the pecking order. Which drive do they come from on Linden Hills? Why should we listen to a hallucinating fanatic among us like Ezekiel? It's well and good for Jesus to be demonstrating wisdom and performing deeds of power over there at the Sea of Galilee. Yet, when he comes home to Nazareth, he's just a carpenter. Who does this uneducated man think he is to be propounding the Torah alongside the great teachers of the law in the synagogue?

So, how can we honor prophets, especially in our hometowns? First, we must take a visionary as she or he is now, not as we knew her or him in other times or as the prophet fits our social analysis. Second, we must try to suspend our prosaic everyday assumptions when we have the privilege of experiencing poetic, original thinking. Third, we must move beyond personal defensiveness and argumentativeness and actually listen to what's being said to us. Finally, we must be open to the possibility of radical, positive transformation, both in our own life and in society at large.

May we move off our hill of disbelief to find the beauty and splendor and love that lies all around us, if only we will open our ears and eyes, our hearts and our minds. AMEN.

## NOTES

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- i. Mark 6: 2-3.
  - ii. Mark 6:4.
  - iii. Ezekiel 2: 3,5-6.
  - iv. Gloria Naylor, Linden Hills (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 181-182.
  - v. Ibid., p. 182.
  - vi. Ibid., pp. 183-184.
  - vii. Ibid., po. 184.
  - viii. Ibid., p. 59.
  - ix. Ibid., pp. 100-116.
  - x. Ibid., pp. 216-250.
  - xi. Ibid., pp. 72-90.
  - xii. Ibid., pp. 97-116.
  - xiii. Ibid., p. 116.
  - xiv. Ibid., p. 31.
  - xv. Ibid., p. 39.
  - xvi. Ibid., p. 240-242.
  - xvii. Ibid., pp. 195-198.