

WHO ARE OUR PROPHETS NOW?
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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The first time Jesus shows up in a synagogue after being baptized by John in the River Jordan, people are "astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority", according to the Gospel of Mark. "What is this?" the congregants say: "A new teaching -- with authority!" And "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee."ⁱ

In the Gospel of Luke, Just before this same synagogue story is reported, Jesus shows up at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth and reads the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free." Jesus then says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," and these congregants too are amazed at his words, but in this case saying, "Is this not Joseph's son?" Then, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."ⁱⁱ Jesus places himself within the line of prophets that includes Isaiah, and Jesus claims that he's one of them himself.

So, what exactly is a prophet anyway? We get some help from the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible lectionary reading for today from Deuteronomy.ⁱⁱⁱ Moses, after he's instructed the Israelites on the role and privileges of priests, and warned them against soothsayers or augurs who presume to be able to foretell the future, then describes how God will raise up prophets like himself from among the people in the future. God will put his own words in the mouths of the prophets, who shall then speak what God commands. The people will be held accountable for

heeding the words that prophets speak in God's name. It's also explained that any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods or presumes to say with authority anything not commanded by God shall die.

Scholar Huston Smith has written about prophets in his classic textbook, *The World's Religions*, used for more than half a century in universities and divinity schools to contextualize Christianity and Judaism along with Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other Eastern and primal traditions. Smith points out that the term "prophet" comes from the Greek *pro*, which means "for" and *phetes*, which means "to speak". Faithful to the original Hebrew, a prophet is someone who speaks for another, namely for God. This is quite different from the popular conception of a prophet as a soothsayer or someone who foretells the future. In fact, what the great writing prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos and Micah primarily did was to challenge the social and economic inequalities of their time in the name of God's commandments of love and justice. Prophets stood against the status quo and called everyone to account in relation to the higher moral law.^{iv} "I know how many are your transgressions," cries Amos in the name of God. "You who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate... Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."^v Eight hundred years later a Jewish prophet named Jesus calls out, "Woe to you, blind guides...hypocrites [who] have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and good faith... You clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence."^{vi}

So, these prophets spoke thousands of years ago. But who are our prophets now, today? Who's looking at current social and economic conditions and calling us to account, authentically in the name of God? Who's challenging us in relation to the highest moral law to fulfill the commandments of love and justice?

There's a potential problem here at the outset, though. There's a strong tradition within Protestant Christianity of cessationism. That is, prophets belong to the Biblical era only, and they ceased with Jesus and his apostles.^{vii} Although this position held sway from the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century well into the nineteenth – for over three hundred years – it was rethought in virtually all circles, from conservatives to liberals, starting in the 1800's.^{viii} Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants began to insist that one could and did speak God's words when filled with the Holy Spirit. Joseph Smith claimed to have received divine revelations that became titled *The Book of Mormon* and led to the founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Not only was Joseph Smith seen as a prophet, but also subsequent presidents of the Church have been considered prophets in the same sense as those in the Bible.^{ix} Unitarian Christians Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker asserted around the same time in the early 1800's that far from revelation having been sealed in biblical times, it has always been accessible to anyone who simply opens his or her eyes to moral and religious truth.^x Today we speak freely and easily about modern prophets like Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu, Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa and Marian Wright Edelman -- who heard the word of God, acted upon it, and sought to inspire the rest of us to do the same.

But I'd like to go a step further this morning in answering the question of who our prophets are now. They could be and should be each and every one of us. Ralph Waldo Emerson preached in his famous Divinity School Address at Harvard in 1838: "If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice. If a man dissemble, deceive, he deceives himself, and goes out of acquaintance with his own being."^{xi} Emerson connected us directly to Jesus when he said, "Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets... He saw that God incarnates himself in

man... He said... "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think."^{xii}

We're all potentially prophets. Twentieth-century theologian James Luther Adams spoke regularly of the "prophethood of all believers".^{xiii} This was a kind of play on words on the foundational Protestant doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers," a concept that traces back to Martin Luther's sixteenth century notion that although a bishop may claim to anoint, ordain, or consecrate, "In fact we are all consecrated priests through baptism."^{xiv} That is, no Christian needs an ordained priest as an intermediary to relate to God. And we all have equal rights to read the Bible, preach on it, and expound the Christian faith. James Luther Adams simply extended that idea: All Christians should see themselves not only as priests but also as prophets.

As Adams wrote in a 1984 essay, "The prophethood of all believers...entails the obligation to share in the analysis, criticism, and transformation of institutions, including the analysis and transformation of the church... We think here of the labor, the women's suffrage, feminist, antiracist, and social welfare movements. And now we live in a world of terrorism, holocausts, nuclear weaponry, and indifference to poverty and hunger."^{xv}

Here's some of what Adams meant by the transformation of the church, making it what he called the free church: "I call that church free which...brings the individual, even the unacceptable, into a caring, trusting fellowship that protects and nourishes... the prophethood and the priesthood of all believers... I call that church free which liberates from bondage to the principalities and powers of the world, whether churchly or secular, and which promotes the continuing reformation of its own and other institutions...[which] invites and engenders liberation from repression and exploitation, whether of nation or economic system, of race or sex or class.... But the church is never wholly free: It tolerates injustice, special privilege, and

indifference to suffering, as though it were not accountable to a tribunal higher than the world's.... In the midst of this unfreedom, the congregation comes together to adore that which is holy, to confess its own brokenness, and to renew the covenant. I call that church free which does not cringe in despair, but casting off fear is lured by the divine persuasion to respond in hope to the light that has shone and that still shines in the darkness."^{xvi}

So we are all prophets now. What's the critical issue of our day in America when it comes to the transformation of institutions, challenging the principalities and powers, and liberation from repression and exploitation? When Marian Wright Edelman, Christian author, civil rights activist and founder of the Children's Defense Fund was on campus two months ago as the Rathbun Visiting Fellow, she described how she hoped to live through two great movements in her lifetime: the Civil Rights Movement and the Occupy Wall Street Movement. She spoke of this new Occupy Movement, ragged and disorganized as it currently is, as having the potential for real societal, economic and human transformation on a grand scale. She reminded us that the Reverend Martin Luther King "warned us about the failure to use our great wealth as a nation to make sure that everybody had the basic necessities of life." She reminded us that Rev. King was assassinated at the very beginning of the Poor People's Campaign that he had helped plan and organize -- a campaign for economic justice for blacks and whites alike.^{xvii}

So, the Occupy Movement may well be picking up where the Poor People's Campaign left off more than forty years ago. Both Joanne and I preached about it from this pulpit last quarter. Joanne quoted economist Paul Krugman's description of how "wealthy Americans who benefit hugely from a system rigged in their favor react with hysteria to anyone who points out how rigged the system is."^{xviii} We see now, after President Obama's State of the Union Speech last Wednesday, that the Warren Buffett rule -- that millionaires shouldn't be taxed at a lower

rate than their secretaries -- is being called class warfare by many wealthy Americans.^{xix} I pointed out in my sermon that there's been relatively little religious involvement in the Occupy movement by Christians.^{xx} There's lots of room for the prophethood of all believers to get involved now.

This may not be your own arena of prophethood, but I believe with James Luther Adams that we're all now called to the vocation once reserved for the Hosea's, Jeremiahs and Micahs. A favorite hymn of my college chaplain, William Sloane Coffin, was "Once to Ev'ry Man and Nation," written by James Russell Lowell in 1844. Some of its lessons are that "Once to ev'ry man and nation comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth and falsehood, for the good or evil side... New occasions teach new duties; time makes ancient good uncouth; they must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth." We began with a hymn today that asked for insight from God for this time of decision. It asked that lightning's bright spark dispel whatever dims our vision.^{xxi} We'll close with a hymn that gives God thanks and praise for those who, with courage and with grace, work to build a future for us all.^{xxii} May each of us, following in the footsteps of Isaiah and Jesus, be true prophets who "bring good news to the poor...proclaim release to the captives...[and] let the oppressed go free."^{xxiii}

BENEDICTION

(In the words of the epistle of James 1: 22,25)

"Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers...

Those who look into the perfect law,

The law of liberty, and persevere,

Being not hearers who forget, but doers who act,

They will be blessed in their doing. AMEN.

NOTES

ⁱ From the gospel lectionary reading for January 29, 2012: Mark 1: 21-18.

ⁱⁱ See Luke 4: 16-30.

ⁱⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 18: 15-20.

^{iv} Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 288, 290-291.

^v Amos 5: 12,24.

^{vi} Matthew 23: 16,23,25.

^{vii} Robert Bruce Mullin, *Miracles and the Modern Religious Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 11; See also, Craig Simonian, "A Challenge Against the Cessation of Prophecy" at www.ourvineyard.org/files/ON_THE_CESSATION_OF_PROPHECY_web.htm

^{viii} Mullin, *Miracles*, p. 1.

^{ix} "Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)" in Stuart M. Matlins and Arthur J. Magida, *How to Be a Perfect Stranger: The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook* (Woodstock, VTY: Skylight Paths Publishing, 3rd Ed., 2003), pp. 204, 207.

^x Mullin, p. 26.

^{xi} Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," 1838, in *Self-Reliance and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1993), p. 104.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 107.

^{xiii} See James Luther Adams, *The Prophethood of All Believers*, edited by George K. Beach (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

^{xiv} Martin Luther, *Weimar Ausgabe*, vol. 6, p. 407, lines 19-25.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priesthood_of_all_believers

^{xv} Adams, *Prophethood*, pp. 94-95.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, pp. 313-314.

^{xvii} Jordan Shapiro, "Edelman Finds Meaning," *Stanford Daily* (December 1, 2011).

^{xviii} Joanne Sanders, "In God We Trust", a sermon preached in the Stanford Memorial Church on October 16, 2001. www.stanford.edu/group/religiouslife/cgi-bin/wordpress/media/past-sermons/

^{xix} "Obama's Populist Case for His Re-election," *The Week* (February 3, 2012), p. 2.

^{xx} Scotty McLennan, "A Liberal's 'Kingdom of God'", a sermon preached in the Stanford Memorial Church on November 27, 2011.

^{xxi} Jane Parker Huber, "O God of Vision" (1981).

^{xxii} Tom Hunter, "O God, Who Teaches Us to Live" (1992).

^{xxiii} Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18.