

**CAN WE LISTEN TO PROPHETS?
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
February 12, 2012**

Two weeks ago I preached a sermon with the title "Who Are Our Prophets Now?" After connecting the ancient Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament to Jesus of the New Testament, based on the lectionary readings from the Bible for the day, I challenged all of us in the words of theologian James Luther Adams to be an active part now, today, of the "prophethood of all believers." I explained that prophets have historically spoken in the name of God, not in the commonly misunderstood sense of being soothsayers -- foretelling the future -- but in the sense of challenging the social and economic inequalities of their day in the name of God's commandments of love and justice. Prophets have stood against the status quo and called people to account in relation to a higher moral law. Along the way in that sermon I mentioned five Christians who have publicly been called modern prophets: Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu, Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa, and Marian Wright Edelman. Today, I'd like to ask specifically whether we can listen to those particular prophets in relation to their proclamations about bigotry, poverty, and war.

But let's start with the context of today's Bible readings about an Old Testament prophet named Elisha and a New Testament prophet named Jesus. We learn in the reading from Second Kings¹ that Elisha cures the Aramean (now Syrian) military commander Naaman of leprosy. But at first Naaman won't listen to the prophet's advice to go wash in the Jordan River seven times to be healed. Instead, Naaman goes away angry, because he had a different image of how a prophet was supposed to heal; namely, by calling upon God's name and waving his hand over the

leprosy ("Abracadabra!" Poof! All gone!). There was a social and political aspect to this as well, as is typical of engagement with prophets. The Arameans had just had a major military victory over the Israelites, and now the Aramean commander was coming to an Israelite prophet for help with his personal social stigma and health problem.ⁱⁱ Naaman resents being told to bathe in the Jordan, an Israelite river. He exclaims, "'Are not...the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?' He turned and went away in a rage."ⁱⁱⁱ Luckily he had wise servants, though. They reminded him that he probably would have been willing to do something quite difficult, if the prophet Elisha had so commanded, and here he was just being asked to go and bathe. Why not just give it a try? "So, he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; [and sure enough] his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy..."^{iv}

Elisha also gets directly involved in politics by anointing kings-to-be in Syria and Israel who bring down the Israelite King Ahab; Ahab has married a foreign wife, Jezebel, who promotes the worship of other gods than the God of Israel. Elisha is also known as one who can perform extraordinary acts like making oil in empty vessels, raising a person from the dead, and feeding multitudes with food that should have only fed a few. Some 900 years later, another prophet in Israel named Jesus of Nazareth similarly is reported to make wine out of water,^v raise people from the dead,^{vi} and feed a crowd of five thousand from five loaves of bread and two fish.^{vii} As we learn in today's gospel lesson,^{viii} Jesus also is capable of curing leprosy. And like Elisha, Jesus as prophet is often not listened to. For example, Luke reports that when Jesus tells people in his home synagogue in Nazareth that he has been specially anointed, like the prophet Isaiah, to bring good news to the poor and let the oppressed go free, they are so enraged that they literally drive Jesus out of town and to the edge of a cliff before he escapes.^{ix}

We have trouble listening to prophets in our own time as well, and we're known to kill them. Here's some of what the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote to fellow clergy when he was imprisoned in the Birmingham City Jail in 1963:

"I have been disappointed with the church...All too many...have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stained-glass windows... In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities... [The] religious community [has] largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice...The early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society... Things are different now. The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound... The judgment of God is upon the church as never before."^x Less than five years later Rev. King had been assassinated by a person whom he'd called, in a sermon the night before, one "of our sick white brothers."^{xi}

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, another modern prophet, asks us to push brotherhood another step, and he's not easy to listen to either:

"When I was serving as chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa... as we listened to accounts of truly monstrous deeds of torture and cruelty, it would have been easy to dismiss the perpetrators as monsters because their deeds were truly monstrous. But we are reminded that God's love is not cut off from anyone... "We cannot condemn anyone as being irredeemable... Yes, each of us has the capacity for great evil. Not

one of us can say with certainty that we would not become perpetrators if we were subject to the same conditioning as those in South Africa, Rwanda, or anywhere that hatred perverts the human spirit... Each of us has a capacity for great evil but also for great good... In God's family, there are no outsiders. All are insiders, Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab... Hutu and Tutsi... Pakistani and Indian -- all belong... [I]t is a radical thing that Jesus says that we are members of one family. We belong. So...George Bush and Osama Bin Laden belong together. God says, All, all are My children. It is shocking. It is radical...You don't choose your family. They are God's gift to you, as you are to them...^{xii} Can we listen to prophets?

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, India, explained that "Love cannot remain by itself -- it has no meaning. Love has to be put into action and that action is service. Whatever form we are, able or disabled, rich or poor, it is not how much we do, but how much love we put in the doing."^{xiii}

Written on the wall of her home for children in Calcutta were these words:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered.
Love them anyway.
If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.
Do good anyway...
If you are honest and sincere, people may deceive you.
Be honest and sincere anyway.
What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.
Create anyway...
The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.
Do good anyway...^{xiv}

Can we listen to prophets?

Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, not only committed her life to serving the poor but also warned us against militarism and war. She reacted against the arguments of people like Celsus, a cultivated man of the third century, who insisted on the importance of armed defense against those who would attempt to attack and destroy a

civilization, in his case the Barbarians at the gates of Rome. Celsus criticized Christians for many reasons, but especially for their commitment to nonviolence and refusal to fight in the army. Dorothy Day noted that the great Christian scholar Origen, replying in his famous 'Contra Celsum', said: "Christians have been taught not to defend themselves against their enemies; and because they have kept the laws which command gentleness and love to man, on this accord they have received from God that which they would not have succeeded in doing if they had been given the right to make war, even if they may have been quite able to do so." Dorothy Day preached that the Christian obligation to nonviolent defense and nonviolent social action could find no better basis than the words of Origen in the Contra Celsum: "No longer do we take the sword against other nations, nor do we learn war any more since we have become the sons of peace through Jesus, Who is our author, instead of following the traditional customs by which we were strangers to the covenant."^{xv} Nonviolence has never been a popular doctrine, though, either as a way of life or as a basis for national defense or for revolution, as prophets like Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, and Dorothy Day learned on a daily basis. Can we listen to prophets?

American attorney Marian Wright Edelman, the founder of the Children's Defense Fund, civil rights activist, and anti-poverty advocate has prophetically reminded us that law is not the last word. Morality is. She wrote this in a book of prayers called *Guide My Feet*:

- O God, forgive our rich nation where small babies die of cold quite legally.
- O God, forgive our rich nation where small children suffer from hunger quite legally.
- O God, forgive our rich nation where toddlers and school children die from guns sold quite legally.
- O God, forgive our rich nation that lets children be the poorest group of citizens quite legally.
- O God, forgive our rich nation that lets the rich continue to get more at the expense of the poor quite legally.
- O God, forgive our rich nation which thinks security rests in missiles rather than in mothers, and in bombs rather than in babies.

O God, forgive our rich nation for not giving you sufficient thanks by giving to others their daily bread.

O God, help us never to confuse what is quite legal with what is just and right in Your sight.^{xvi} [Amen]

Can we listen to prophets?

BENEDICTION

Go in peace. Live simply, gently, at home in yourselves.

Act justly. Speak justly.

Remember the depth of your own compassion.

Forget not your power in the days of your powerlessness.

Amen.

NOTES

ⁱ 2 Kings 5: 1-5, 9-14.

ⁱⁱ See *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), Vol. III, pp. 193-195.

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Kings 5:12.

^{iv} 2 Kings 5:14.

^v John 2: 1-11.

^{vi} Matt. 9:18-26; Mark 5: 21-43; Luke 7: 11-17; 8:40-56.

^{vii} Matthew 14: 13-21; Mark 6: 34-44.

^{viii} Mark 1: 40-45.

^{ix} Luke 4: 16-30.

^x . Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" (April 16, 1963), in James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 298-300.

^{xi} Martin Luther King, Jr., "I See the Promised Land" (April 3, 1968) in James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 279

^{xii} Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), pp. 10-13, 18-22.

^{xiii} Mother Teresa, as cited in Unitarian Universalist Association, *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #562

^{xiv} As cited at (<http://among-friends.ca/spiritual-writings/mother-teresas-prayer.htm>)

^{xv} Margaret Quigley & Michael Garvey, *The Dorothy Day Book* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1982), p. 43.

^{xvi} Marian Wright Edelman, *Guide My Feet* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 88.