

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
July 9, 2006

Reflection: "...radical faith is not an achievement; for if it were we would will it and be done. Rather, it is a gift, and we are left to wait receptively, to watch and to pray." Walter Bruggeman, The Prophetic Imagination

Readings: 2 Samuel: 5: 1-5  
Mark 6: 1-13

Hymns: Hymn #420 God of Grace & Glory  
Hymn #394 There is a Balm in Gilead  
Hymn #302 I Danced in the Morning

---

Hail, Prophet!  
© 2006 Ray Bagnuolo

What does it take to be a prophet? What must a person do, how many paths do they need to walk, what predictions or performances do they need to successfully complete before they are called a prophet?

I guess it depends on prophecy of which you speak. There is, first of all, the prophecy of the ANE or Ancient Near Eastern. In this era, prophets were critics of society, announcers of the future, or a charismatically authorized messenger. (I always wanted to be charismatically oriented, haven't you?!) In other words, this is frequently a prophet inspired with speech from a third party. Oldest know records of such prophets extend back to the third millennium BCE.

Then there are the prophets and the prophecies of the Preexilic and Postexilic Hebrew Nation. In the Preexilic period, there seem to have been no prerequisites for becoming a prophet – anyone could find himself or herself inspired by the Divine, the Lord. Indeed, prophets came in all shapes and forms, among them the shepherd, the priest, agriculturalist, and the scribe - to name a few,

And most of these folk were not carrying happy messages! However, following the exile of Israel, the role of prophecy began to shift. Simply, there was a movement, gradually, in the messages of the prophets from Doom to Hope. Somewhere, the compass of the winds moved and there

was a diminishment of the sense that God was just a punishing God about to bring disaster forth on Judah and Israel, full of vengeance and wrath. A message that had been well known for a very long time. Instead, the prophets began speaking about the fact that the price of Yahweh's judgment had been paid. God had been satisfied and there were better times ahead.

Now, I am not suggesting that this is actually true that God meted God's judgment in manifold wars and violent ways and God's appetite for such things was finally satiated. No.

But this is about prophets and how they interpreted the signs and the times. And the change caught on and so did the hope for a better, brighter future for the Chosen People.

Perception, it seems, has played a role throughout history.

And it is here in this time period that the David of this morning's readings is found. He is part of the prophecy of a united Israel, the fulfillment of a new and powerful ruler that would sail forward like a white dove; a time when the sky would clear, and the pain and suffering of the people had would be heard and answered by God.

Then we have the Early Christian prophecy; prophecy that is the inspired speech of those who spoke in the name of God, the risen Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

The term prophet, as we know it, comes from the Greek, *pro+ph-et-es*; literally, one who speaks "on behalf of."

As prophets emerged from the ANE period, they were not so much those who would tell the future, as they were folks who spoke on behalf of others. Prophets gave voice to the voiceless, often proclaiming with insight the evils/illnesses that afflicted their societies and ultimately would herald their downfall unless something were to change.

The changes that were called for were, in fact, often radical, in that the prophets would reach back into the deepest roots of their religious traditions and summon people to be faithful to those teachings. These were often extreme demands.

Jesus was one of these radical prophets. He and his disciples are found in today's gospel on their mission of evangelizing through Galilee and

beyond. This was a circuit, so to speak that Jesus was making of the area, according to Mark's chronology, with visits to Nazareth, Bethsaida, the regions of Tyre and Sidon, Decapolis, Dalmanutha, a return to his home base of Capernaum, followed by a visit to Jerusalem, via Trans-Jordan and Jericho. It was quite a bit of territory and there were many more stops along the way than are recorded here.

We have the prophet Jesus and his followers, carrying the message of the Good News, the gospel of compassion and love, embracing the radical historical practices embodied in his Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere, calling a nation back – not to its laws – but to its traditional practices of hospitality, caring for the sick, the lonely, the children, the oppressed, and the marginalized – many of which were historical practices, as well. But he went further, reaching beyond his Jewish heritage to others...

And there was something very charismatic about him. His works and wonders were more than the charlatans or magicians of the times. His ability to heal or bring forth healing in others was astounding; and he used the wonders he performed to encourage, engage, charge others with reaching out to the others among them, following the great commandments they have known all their lives.

Much as we shake our head today at some of the atrocities and horrors we seem willing to live with, so too, must Jesus have been stunned by the harshness and hardness of his times.

True, there were many places open to Jesus, his teachings, and the faith he seemed to bring out in people – and in those places he performed many wonders. It was not false modesty that often prompted Jesus to say, "Your faith has healed you..." because in fact it was then and is now belief and faith that leads to healing and wonders.

Not all places were open to such Spirit, though. The problem Jesus and his disciples encountered in Galilee was basically that he was known. His origin was known: son of the carpenter, a member of a family familiar to the crowds, and he was judged based on his origin – not on who he was or what he had become. Sound familiar?

He was just a carpenter's son – like David was just a boy tending sheep. Well, not quite true for either.

Yes, Jesus was surprised by this but did not become cynical from what we can tell. I imagine such things made him realize how great a mountain he

had to wash away – and how he would most likely not see the completion of his work.

It's interesting, that once David became king of Israel, following the defeat of the Jebusites, the first thing he did was to further fortify the fortress he captured making it totally impenetrable. It was, after all, the Great City of David.

How times had changed when we get to Jesus. No fortress, no great city, no earthly kin or kingdom. God was no longer on the side of a chosen few, no longer captured in the fortress of those in command, but accessible and available to all – for the benefit of all.

Jesus as much as said with his actions that the fighting and fortresses were not going to make it. They were not going to bring peace and fullness, only more pain and suffering, shifting the benefits of victory and might back and forth like a never ending game of three-d chess.

And a subtle but major shift occurs in this passage, for the first time Jesus tells his disciples to go – go out, carry the message to all who will listen, and when they don't – shake off the sand from your sandals – not to discard those who are not yet ready to listen, no that's backwards, rather to not let your hearts be troubled or discouraged, it's ok, go to the next person and the next. There is much to do, keep at it, practice – go for a day, take nothing with you, just go two by two and talk with the people about the wonders you have seen and the things you have learned. Then, return here tonight and let's talk about how things went.

It was Jesus, training the disciples, readying them for the work that would need to be done, acknowledging that he would not be around forever.

In his book, *Essential Writings*, Gustavo Gutiérrez – the Peruvian theologian and Dominican priest who is regarded as the founder of liberation theology writes this about the prophets and contemplation that produces praxis - prophetic action:

“The journey of prophecy and the journey of contemplation are precisely that: a journey. The road must be traveled in freedom without turning from it because of its pitfalls, and without pretending ignorance of its ever new forms, for unjust human suffering continues to be heart rendering and insatiable; it continually raises new questions and causes new dilemmas. It never ends; neither does protest, after the manner of Job. Although the way of talking

about God has become clearer, it continues to be mysterious, as awesome and as alluring as ever. Many difficult tasks remain to be done, many distressing questions to be answered, but...a glimpse has been given of the path to the full encounter with the loving and free God.”

The disciples were learning how to respond to the situations they would encounter on the road, just as we do every day.

In the end of the Author’s Note to the play *Torch Song Trilogy*, Harvey Fierstein writes:

Not one of the characters you’ll meet is “right.” There are no answers forthcoming. But like an old familiar half heard song playing on a jukebox you might just catch a line that reaches out and touches something going on inside of you. And for that instant you are relieved of isolation. That is the worth of a Torch Song. That is the goal of these plays.”

We carry this “touch”to others; we are the ones that in our prophetic ministry touch something going on inside of others that says, “Yes! Yes!! Yes!!!” There are no right or wrong characters out there, just those with whom we have yet to speak. Like a torch song, the Scriptures reflect and harmonize their familiar often heard calls to service and compassion, love and radical hospitality that abides in each of us. At times, when we read certain, familiar, well-worn passages, we are touched and warmed, and then almost immediately overwhelmed by the new questions and dilemmas of which Gutiérrez speaks – the need and sickness of this world and its methods are daunting, yet like Jesus and the disciples, all we need to do is trust God and carry on, shaking loose the sand that annoys us on our way like a pebble in the shoe, and keep on – keeping on. No answers... just keep going.

Let not your hearts be troubled, for we are not alone in this work – but we must all diligently and vigilantly do our share...and then some.

We are the modern prophets and we have the Good News. We are called to say, “Enough!” There’s a better way.” And so you have and will continue to do. This I know...

Amen

