

In the name of God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen

The voice of the prophet should be a lonely voice. Many claim to be prophets, authentic speakers and interpreters of God's word. Recently we were told on national television that the earthquake in Haiti was provoked by a pact the Haitian people allegedly made with Satan to help them evict their French colonial occupiers in 1790 or so and become the second independent nation in the western hemisphere. The same Christian pastor told us that the attack of Al Qaeda on this country on September 11, 2001 was God's response to our tolerance of gay relationships. Being now a resounding 0 for 2, one might hope Pat Robertson would not come to bat a third time, but I am confident he will, at least until his malignant senility runs its course.

Maybe one way to tell whether prophecy is false or not is to ask if the prophet is doing it on a commercial basis, more or less self-ordained, called by the almighty dollar. A hallmark of the genuine call from God seems to be that we do not embrace it right away, but that we run from it initially. We doubt it. We ask in all humility, "Who, me, Lord? Surely not." Jonah heard God's voice telling him to go to Nineveh to preach to the poor souls there, that they might change their ways and serve God from now on. Jonah, good sailor that he was, said "Aye, aye sir" and promptly booked passage on the first ship going the other way. Peter, of whom Jesus said "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church," martyred at Rome and all that, early in his prophetic career, was so frightened he denied Jesus three times in rapid succession, in his greatest hour of need. Moses, when commissioned by God to confront the Pharaoh of Egypt about his maltreatment of the children of Israel, responded by telling God that his brother Aaron would be so much better for that job.

And Jeremiah, as we heard a few moments ago, told God that "Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a lad." But remember what God said to him: "Before I formed you in the womb I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Before you were born. So before Jeremiah's mother gave birth to him, God had his eye on him. That may not be a first in scripture, but it does make me think, for a moment at least, of the vitality and worth of that unborn child who became the Jeremiah we know, and who has enriched our souls for 2600 years now. Suffice it to say, with the pro-life side of our brains, that it is a good thing his mother opted to carry him to term. But that sermon is for another day, if ever my variant thoughts on the subject come together enough for it.

Things were tough in the Jerusalem of Jeremiah's day. What else is new? I was there last spring, overwhelmed by a sense of spiritual and historic awe, but also overwhelmed by the apartheid regime I saw in action. To a Southern boy of the 1940s and 1950s, there sure was a lot of déjà vu all over again. Jeremiah too was torn by what he saw. Jehoiakim, a forerunner of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, had succeeded a much loved and benevolent ruler, Josiah, but Jehoiakim was a terror. He promoted the burning of the incense at the altars of dozens of gods, and even tolerated occasional child sacrifice. Idols enjoyed a heyday, and to Jeremiah's dismay, the public more and more went along. Well Jeremiah was unstinting in his condemnation of their desecration of the temple. He longed so for the healing of the people, the temple, and the kingdom that he poignantly cried out "Is there no balm in Gilead?" Prophets get little applause, then or now. Jeremiah was barred from the temple, and run out of town with a price on his head. The other side of that coin of course is that we read and treasure what Jeremiah wrote now, 2600 years later, and who remembers or cares about Jehoiakim?

Jeremiah likely took solace from the psalm we just read together:

In you, Oh Lord, I take refuge...

You are my rock and my fortress...

You, O Lord, are my hope, my trust.

We have all been there. In just the past ten days we have had two deaths in our parish family here. Folks here are battling depression, physical illness, addiction and precarious marriages. In you, O

Lord, I take refuge, and indeed there is balm of Gilead.

In the gospel today, from Luke, following upon the portion we heard a week ago, we encounter Jesus prophesying over in the West Bank, at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He ran into something prophets often have to deal with. The congregation heard him out, and it sounded good. “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” But then they got to thinking, “Wait a minute. This is Joseph’s boy, who grew up here.” And Nazareth then had only 50 or so families. As Jesus was quick to point out, no prophet is honored, accepted in his hometown. Are you taken seriously by the folks in your hometown who watched you grow up? I was at least 40 before old ladies in Morganton quit remarking on how much I had grown. Of course some of them have too. I remember when my friend Short Patton was home one weekend. Introducing himself after church to a great grandmotherly type, he stuck out his hand, smiled, and said Short Patton, to which the woman responded “You are not so thin yourself.”

It got worse for Jesus with his hometown folks though, because he told some Biblical stories that they took personally. He held up a metaphorical mirror and they saw themselves in it. For example there were lots of widows in dire straits in Israel in Elijah’s time, but the only one he was sent to was a foreigner, a pagan in the eyes of the synagogue faithful. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha, but the one who was healed was a Syrian, for heaven’s sake. That went over so poorly that the congregation was not only filled with rage to the point of running Jesus out of town, they tried to throw him off a cliff.

Are there prophets today, or is that just more or less interesting religious history? Well, there are. Mary Daly, a theologian at Boston College, died earlier this month at age 81. It is said she gave the Vatican more critical heat than anyone since Martin Luther. She was a loud and vociferous reminder to the Roman Catholic Church that half the people in this world are women, and of the biblical notion that humanity, female as well as male, is created in God’s image. She worried that so long as God is male, then the male is God. She was also fond of saying that in Christ there may be neither male nor female, but everywhere else there sure is. A prophet who made us think, and who was often not welcome in her own home.

Martin Luther King Jr., like Jeremiah, was but a lad, 26 years old when he took on the leadership role in the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955. A young pastor, with a wife and small children, newly ordained out of Boston University, if he had only been thinking selfishly, maybe if he had had good sense, for there was no way for him to know what awaited him in the next 13 years, the last 13 years of his life, he might well have let that moment pass him by, and it surely must have been tempting. In hindsight he set his face toward Jerusalem that day in Montgomery, where the front door of his small parish church was visible from the portico of the Capitol where Jefferson Davis was sworn in 94 years earlier as President of the Confederacy. Dr. King went on to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable, becoming our national conscience, always centering what he had to teach us on the Sermon on the Mount. His battle stars are known to the ages—the Birmingham Jail, the buses in Montgomery, the Edmund Pettus Bridge over the Alabama River at Selma, the garbage workers strike in Memphis, and on and on, until at Memphis at age 39, he gave his life, further assuring immortality. He was nothing less than a prophet of God.

So too was Oscar Romero, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador, who preached the Sermon on the Mount tirelessly in defense of the poor and the downtrodden, the marginalized of El Salvador. The military junta and the oligarchical land owners must surely have said, as Henry II did of Thomas Becket “Is there no one who will rid us of this meddlesome priest?” Well just as the four Norman knights stepped forward to kill Becket in his cathedral at Canterbury at Christmas 1170, so too were there patriots willing to step forward in service to the powers of this world in El Salvador. Their timing was impeccable. They gunned him down as he stood at the altar, elevating the host and saying: All this we ask through your Son Jesus Christ. By him, and with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and forever.

Think of Oscar Romero when Anne says those words at the altar today. I imagine she may.

One more prophet this morning, and I am sure you can make your own list. Happily Nelson Mandela was not called upon to forfeit his life, only 27 years of it in a very small prison cell at Robben Island, off Cape Town. Sentenced to life for preaching resistance against the apartheid laws of South Africa, he put the 27 years in prison to good use, for he is a most brilliant and clever man. Ever so slowly, he won over his jailors, his persecutors, and those who had imprisoned him. He won them over to his cause of freedom, of non-bitterness, non-vindictiveness, of reconciliation. By the time he was set free 20 years ago he was not only the most charismatic man in South Africa, but arguably the most powerful, in the good sense of power. And together with men such as Desmond Tutu, he built a new nation centered on a non-violent equality. A prophet who is yet with us, thanks be to God.

As Paul reminds us though we know only in part and we prophesy only in part. Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part. Then I will know fully. Isn't it nice we have something to look forward to, as we journey onward in this life? And to guide us on this journey we have the voice of the prophets, ancient and modern, and the knowledge that faith, hope, and love abide, and the greatest is love.

Amen.

St. Luke's
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