



NORTHMINSTER CHURCH

DO JUSTICE, LOVE MERCY, WALK
HUMBLY WITH GOD. MICAH 6:8

The Power of a Prophet

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Isaiah 62:1-5

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For Zion's sake, I will not be silent;
for the sake of Jerusalem, I will not rest—
not until her integrity shines like the dawn,
her deliverance like a flaming torch.

2 The nations will see your vindication,
and the rulers your splendor;

you will have a new name
that YHWH's mouth will bestow.

3 You will be a garland of beauty in YHWH's
hands,

a solemn crown worn by your God.

4 Never again will you be called Forsaken.

Never again will your land be called Desolate.
But you will be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land will be called Married.

For YHWH will take delight in you
and your land will be joined with God in
wedlock.

5 For just as a young couple marry,
you will be forever married to this land;
as a newly married couple rejoice over each
other,
so will YHWH rejoice over you.

Arms crossed in the back of the room, the prophet watched through narrow eyes as the preacher, his eyes half closed, sluggishly read from the sacred Shemot scroll. She couldn't take much more of this. The synagogue was sparsely populated with the few glassy eyed men and women who had made the weekly trek to the meeting place fueled by nothing much more than habit. The prophet found it abysmal.

"...you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh," the monotone preacher droned. "Indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land..." Across the room, a thin wooden door bumped open to let some sunlight and a straggler come through. No one cared to turn and see who it was. The latecomer made a half-hearted attempt to shut the door, which still hung lazily open, before letting his body fall in the closest of the abundant available seats. The prophet couldn't help but wish the straggler had stubbed his toe, or caught his robe on the door, or *something*. But alas, the room remained lifeless.

In the age of her grandparents, the preachers would light Israel aflame with tongues of fire. When the Empire finally released captive Israel back to her homeland, hope abounded. Visions of Israel's restored glory lit the path of their nation's future – there would be peace among the nations, and paganism would come to an end as David's powerful kingdom was restored! God's favor was assured. All the preachers had to do was put words to the hope, ride the wave of excitement, let their poetry flow. It was easy to have faith then, but now the lamps that lit their way had flickered out. The fire that filled their bellies had died with what proved to be the cold and unproductive passage of time. Few exiles even took the chance to come home, having made a comfortable life in Persia. Israel remained a poor and insignificant province of a foreign Empire. Nothing changed. God never showed up. Now here they sat, despondent and mostly disinterested in such impractical notions as God.

"...I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement," the preacher hummed. "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians." And all of the sudden, something in that cold room crackled to life.

"Do you not hear what you are reading?" The exclamation crashed through the room and startled everyone, even the preacher, even the prophet. *Oh my God*, she thought, eyes wide and mouth open, *was that my voice?* The eyes, no longer quite so glazed, were turning around. It felt as though a hot coal had touched her tongue, like she had been burnt by something hot, and her body moved to the stimulus before her mind even knew what was going on.

The preacher remembered to be indignant. He bent over to pick up the pointing rod he'd dropped on the dusty floor and stammered, "Now excuse me! You need to..."

"No!" the prophet said, her feet carrying her forward towards the front of the room. She started to embrace it, this voice coming out of her mouth. It was the only thing that made sense. "No. For Israel's sake, I will not be silent. For the sake of Jerusalem, I will not rest." She faced off with the preacher and turned on point to embrace the room's attention. "We're

supposed to *be* something,” she chastised. “We’re supposed to be God’s people, a nation of prophets and priests! Do you even hear the Shemot being read right in front of you? Do you hear what God has done for us? Who we are? So, no, I will not be silent! I won’t be silent until the integrity of Israel shines as bright as the dawn, until her deliverance burns like a flaming torch. I will not be silent until every nation sees our vindication, until every ruler sees our splendor, until we’ve become what we were always meant to be. Our God renamed Abraham, renamed Jacob, and Our God will rename us, a new name that God’s own mouth will bestow, something that reflects who we really are and who we are becoming.

“I mean, look around! Look at the magnificent people sitting around you!” The people hesitantly obliged, meeting the eyes of their neighbors. “You may see dirt and dust and poverty, you may see a diminished people fed upon by the beasts of this world, but your eyes are unfocused. That is not what I see. That is not what God sees. You are loved, Israel! You are a garland of beauty in God’s hands, a solemn crown worn by your God, golden and embedded with precious stones. You are God’s people and you are bestowed with a worth human eyes do not recognize. Our nation has been crushed and disgraced and that is now part of who we are, but our journey is not over. Our God calls us into a new future, a new plant growing from these ancient roots,” she gestured towards the scrolls on the rickety podium.

“You and I, we have been called ‘Forsaken.’ Our city has been called ‘Desolate,’ but that’s not what I call you and it’s certainly not what God calls you. We will be called ‘A Delight.’ We will be called ‘Beloved,’ because our God takes delight in us, and nothing can separate us from God’s love. We are not destined for desolation. At the end of our story is not a funeral, but a marriage, a perfect union between Israel and the Divine. Just as a young couple marry, you will be forever united with God. Just as a newly married couple rejoice over one another, so God will rejoice over you. Hear me, O Israel: You are loved and we are not done.”

There was silence, but it was the loudest and fullest silence they had heard in years. It was the silent sound of God breathing life back into their lungs. It was the sound of a people coming alive.

Prophets aren't fortune tellers. I once thought of prophets as little more than holy predictors of the future. I would marvel at their power to predict what was going to happen and shake my head in judgment of their contemporaries who didn't listen to them. Although the only time I really heard about the prophets was when they were talking, obviously and explicitly, about the birth of Christ. Later, as I began to read the prophets (and you're missing out if you haven't!) I realized that this isn't what they seemed to be doing at all. Their works are beautiful and hopeful and challenging, but as far as fortune tellers go, they get the details of the future wrong uncomfortably often. The prophets read more akin to poetry, or sometimes science fiction. They demand a full engagement of the imagination and the conscience. I started to realize that the power of the prophet actually lies somewhere else.

The true power of the prophet is the ability to dream as God dreams. The true power of the prophet is the ability to use Spirit-inspired drama, through words or actions, sermons or poems, to give us a holy imagination, to glimpse the world as God must see it, to glimpse a tomorrow as God wishes tomorrow to unfold. The true power of the prophet is to dismantle our bad stories of power-seeking, to dismantle hopeless stories of despair, and instead to situate us in God's unfolding story of hope for love fully realized, for a marriage between the human and the divine. I believe this was the true power of the prophet in Isaiah.

Centuries later, this was the power of the prophet John of Patmos, writing his letters to an beleaguered people who had trouble imagining what tomorrow could be. He recounts his holy dream: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among humanity.

God will dwell with them;

they will be God's peoples,

and the Divine itself will be with them;

Love will wipe every tear from their eyes.

“See, I am making all things new.” John, like Isaiah, invites his grayscale readers into the colorful tomorrow God dreams of, into this marriage between the human and the Divine.

Thousands of years after John, the same power resided in the prophet who took his stand on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and preached to a people who could not imagine God’s hope of a reconciled world. “I have a dream,” he famously proclaimed, “that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but on the content of their character. [...] I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope.” King, like John, invites his polarized hearers, even a half a century later, into God’s dream of a banquet table big enough for all people.

Theologian and activist Walter Wink once wrote: “History belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being. This is not simply a religious statement. It is as true of communists or capitalists or anarchists as it is of Christians. The future belongs to whoever can envision in the manifold of its potentials a new and desirable possibility, which faith then fixes upon as inevitable. This is the politics of hope.” And I might add, this is the true power of the prophets.

I once made the assumption that the gift of prophecy ended in Biblical times, and looked with hard skepticism on any in this day and age that claimed to be a prophet. But as I learned to pay attention, I learned, as often happens, that I was wrong. Wherever there are voices that will surrender themselves to the vision of God’s Spirit, there is the gift of prophecy, even right now. Don’t miss them. Don’t miss them, write them off, or ignore them, because as hard as they may be for some of us to hear, we absolutely need them if we are to be a part of what God is doing right now in our generation. We absolutely need them if we are to imagine a

tomorrow in which humanity reaches a deeper bond, a more fully realized marriage to the God of Love.

So don't miss the voices of prophets like Rev. William Barber II or Alice Walker or Jordan Peele or Donald Glover who point to the ways racism and white supremacy still infect every part of our life today, who invite us into a future of awareness and true equity. Of prophets like Karoline Lewis or Sue Monk Kidd or Margaret Atwood or Hannah Gadsby or the voices of the #MeToo movement that shatter our illusions of achieved gender equality and invite us into a future of respect of one another's stories. Of prophets like Walter Wink, John Lennon, Brian McLaren, or Gareth Higgins, who confront us with the ineffectiveness of violence and call us into a new story of non-violent change. Of prophets like Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, Bob Lupton, or Shane Claiborne who remind us through their lives that the gospel has inescapable implications for our relationship with the underprivileged, who invite us into their vision of a world of mutually-respectful economic equity. Of prophets like Richard Rohr or Madeline L'Engle or Fred Rogers, who remind us that each of us carries a unique piece of God's image, who invite us into their dream of a neighborhood where we know we are unconditionally loved.

In the world of politics, preaching, and poetry, art and activism, mission and music there are prophetic voices everywhere, in tune with the voice of God's Spirit, inviting us into the future God dreams of. Don't miss them.

So, go find the prophets. Find the ones who, in word and deed, give a foretaste of glory Divine, who give a glimpse of the kin-dom of God. They're the odd-looking ones doling out comfort and discomfort in equal measure. Seek them out. Listen to them. Consume a steady diet of their enchantment. Allow their words to make their way into your soul, into your imagination, until their holy dreams become your holy dreams. And then you, even you, may become a prophet yourself. By God's grace, let us go forth and dream a new world into being.

Amen.