

The Prophetic Spirit
a Sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
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It's not uncommon for me to come to this pulpit with so much on my mind and in my heart that I've spent days and hours beforehand wrestling into something of a more reasonable size and scope. I think of the oft misquoted statement by John Muir, "When we try to pick out anything by itself we find that it is bound fast by a thousand invisible cords that cannot be broken, to everything in the universe." It is all connected – and sometimes, as I cast my line in to catch the sermon – upon reeling it back it seems as though the whole world emerges.

Today this is particularly true, because I have reflections on two topics which are, as it happens, in some tension with each other.

The first is what you see reflected in the title of the sermon – the prophetic spirit. The second is the level of stress I've been seeing lately – here among us – and everywhere I turn. Sometimes it appears as a low level of urgency, or aggravation, sometimes acute anxiety, sometimes an edge of crankiness -- everywhere. So my challenge is to explore, exposit, to expand upon the spirit of prophecy – a story of urgency and stressful responses to the world – while, at the same time, finding a way to address and sooth our own stressed spirits. well – one at a time.

I used to think of prophets as those people – probably fictitious – who could or at least tried to speak of the future. The Hebrew prophets may have had some insight into the ways that history might tend to play out – but that was not their great gift. In fact, some of them were speaking, not of a distant future – but of events as they were coming to pass and, I learned in theological school – some prophetic passages were either written or at least added to after the events they foretold had already come and gone. Truly, the enduring value of the words of the prophets was not in their predictive accuracy – though there are those who might like to think so – it is in the poetry, intensity and power of their words and actions.

However, the intensity of the words of the prophets and the eccentricity of their actions also conjured in my own mind a picture of slightly hysterical individuals with poor social skills and, periodically, some anger management issues. You might think that they were so cranky because they were usually draftees, going about their business when suddenly they were cornered by the almighty of the Hebrew Bible and pressed into service.

Isaiah protested that he had unclean lips – and, apparently, a speech impediment – so his lips were touched by hot coals to purify his mouth – as a host of angels with six wings apiece hovered about him. Most of you know the alarming tale of Joshua who was so afraid to be a prophet that he fled “in secret” from g-d and boarded a ship bound for anyplace but Nineveh. G-d disturbed the oceans so that the ship was nearly lost and Joshua knew that g-d was going to rock his boat until he took up the mantel of prophecy. Then there was Ezekiel, who had to eat a scroll full of g-d's words as preparation for his work of prophecy.

These are extreme stories of extreme people living in extreme times. We, ourselves, live in extreme times and I believe that we misread the prophets, as I did

for so long, if we think that they were simply extremists, hysterics, and complainers.

For some of us, our first positive connection to the Hebrew Prophets may have come when we realized that the Reverend Doctor, Martin Luther King Jr had been paraphrasing the prophet Amos when he said “we are not satisfied and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Since I had not been raised in a religious, much less Biblical, house -- it wasn’t until I read Amos far into adulthood, that I realized that King’s words were inspired by the prophets – though now – with his passion for justice and the passion of the prophets for justice – it seems inevitable. In 1967 Rev. King said: I am sure that we will recognize that there are some things in our society, some things in our world, to which we should never be adjusted. There are some things concerning which we must always be maladjusted if we are to be people of good will.”

That’s the key. The prophets were profoundly maladjusted. Whether they were really visited by a deity as described in the Bible or simply had their eyes opened in a new way, the prophets were among the earliest to look upon human suffering and protest – not with a polite tsk, tsk – but with urgency, fury, pleading, outrage, commanding – with all the strength they had. And not because they had been drafted – but because, in the encounter with the divine, they had seen the world in a new way. The railing of the prophets is out of pain at what they have seen of the human condition – the suffering of women and children, the abuse of power, the rampant greed, the hypocrites who sacrifice at the temple and then go home and exploit friends, family, neighbors.

You know the expression – If you’re not outraged – you’re not paying attention? Something – you may call it g-d or an encounter with the sacred or waking morally – awakened the prophets and they were paying close attention. The Rabbi and activist, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote; “the Prophet hears the silent sigh.” Maybe some of you saw the fluffy movie – what women want – the one where Mel Gibson is suddenly able to read people’s minds and at first it’s rather deafening. The prophet, is attuned to every voice and experience. If you’re a theist – you might say that the prophet is like the heart of G-d afoot on the streets in an agony of pain and sorrow at the suffering, the arrogance and cruelty of the people.

Out of pain and sorrow, the prophet exhorts, weeps, shouts, pleads, threatens, and tries to awaken the people themselves to end the pain, arrogance and cruelty. If you’re not a theist, you might say that the prophet is radically awake to the fullness of being – of every soul and all suffering and wrongdoing.

The prophet is like a breath of compassion, moved and stirred until it is a gust of wind, a storm, and a whirlwind.

Heschel wrote "The prophet is a man who feels fiercely, God has thrust a burden upon his soul and he is bored and stunned by man's fierce greed. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. God is raging in the prophet's words."

Isaiah spoke of this agony: “I am bowed down so that I cannot hear, dismayed so that I cannot see. My mind reels, horror has appalled me; the twilight I longed for has been turned for me into trembling.” Jeremiah bore witness when he cried, “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick... For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead?”

When Heschel said that to really encounter the words of the prophets was like a ceaseless shattering of indifference. That, certainly, was the hope of the prophets. They heard the cries of suffering and as it was shattering to them – they endeavored to attune every ear to that sound – to shake, upturn habit, and end numbness. Isaiah shouted: “Shudder, you complacent ones!”

The work of a prophet was and is to disturb complacency. In theological school, in the company of my colleagues we’re often reminded that our work is not only to be a pastor to the suffering, not only to conduct priestly rites of passage for birth, marriage, for death, not only to teach, not only to articulate the message of our faith – but we are enjoined to do prophetic work and to invite our congregations to prophetic work.

I’m sure that, at least for the most part – none of us is ready to put on sackcloth and ashes and rail in the streets. And, sometimes, prophetic work is interpreted to mean that we’re supposed to be a political movement – not of political parties – but a shared platform of particular social ideas. There are issues of our time that we can and should take up – but it is about more than this or that issue – it’s about a profound, underlying concern. In the time of the prophets it was expressed as faithfulness to the covenant with g-d – making it sound as though that g-d needed their alliance – but that’s a literal, rather than a spiritual or faithful reading. That faithfulness was the way that the Israelites understood the call to an ethical life – it was a call back to the covenant with life and with one another – to the radical compassion of the prophets.

Granted the prophets often expressed that compassion with sharp words of fury. Like the midwife who shouts – push! or the coach who yells from the edges of the field – like a midwife or coach driven to mad distraction. Knowing their compassion and deep sense of urgency, perhaps we can forgive them their hard words and honor them for the passion, compassion, and devotion they lived.

Walter Brueggemann, in his classic and inspiring book – *The Prophetic Imagination* – wrote: The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us. Thus I suggest that prophetic ministry has to do ... with addressing, in season and out of season, the dominant crisis that is enduring... of having our alternative vocation co-opted and domesticated. It may be, of course, that this enduring crisis manifests itself in any given time around concrete issues, but it concerns the enduring crisis that runs from ... issue to... issue... the domestication of vision.” So wrote Brueggemann.

There has ever been a dominant culture that attempts to seduce people with empty promises of happiness to be found in the acquisition of things, by prescribing set roles for life like “provider, professional, homeowner, home maker, famous fill-in-the-blank.’ We set about hurrying from activity to activity to live into these roles because that is the picture of the world that we have inherited. Our lives are filled with tasks, chores, and projects. Sometimes the projects are even doing good works.

Brueggemann said that the prophetic challenge is first to awaken to the crisis of history – this moment – to feel and know the pain, to see the peril and the work – and then, not simply to address symptoms, but to address the deeper causes.

The deep cause is always the same – it is the global failure of human beings to

see, know, and feel our kinship with one another, to be guided by that recognition of solidarity, to be led by compassion.

Of course, we've all had prophetic moments when – beyond our individual lives – we're aware of and awake to this world of suffering, need, and cruelty. Times when the mouthful of food that we eat suddenly reminds us of the starvation of others. When the warm house we live in chills us, feeling with all who live without shelter. When the peace of a morning is shattered by identification with people who live in zones of conflict, violence, and warfare. It is a devastating insight. It may be, if you've had such times, that they've been so hard, even terrifying, so painful that you might feared to be crushed by powerlessness, anguish. Confronted by such rough vision – one temptation is to turn back to business as usual and numb out, to cling to the illusion that all is well as long as all is well with you, and that if all is not well with you, then it's your problem. But this can'tt and doesn't ease the devastation or erase the insight – or nourish the soul. The soul is fed only by soul food.

Without this nourishment there is a hunger that remains – a gnawing presence, muffled pain, an awareness of pain and emptiness.

I believe that the moodiness all around us is not merely the winter that won't let go. Conflicts on the world stage, economic worries, anxiety over invasions of privacy and the loss of personal freedoms, revolutions gone awry, leaks of oil and of nuclear waste. It is a sometimes dull, sometimes sharp despair. Brueggemann said: "The question facing ministry is whether there is anything that can be said, done, or acted in the face of the ideology of hopelessness...The task of prophetic ministry and imagination...is to cut through the despair and to penetrate the dissatisfied coping that seems to have no end or resolution." Brueggeman's words speak of the many kinds of coping that cannot lead to resolution.

A core task of the prophet is – even in the bleakest of times – to crack the shell, allow the pain to be exposed, and on the heels of the pain that comes from seeing the world as it is, comes freedom; the imagination to envision the world as it could be – as it can be. But only face the world as it is and reach, work, in partnership with all who live, for the world as it can be.

Dr. King preached forsaking the illusion that all is well and spoke plainly: we are not satisfied and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream." Amen. Whether we are conscious of it or not – or if we hold it at a distance – when others are hungry – we feel the pang in our own bellies, when others live in strife, we feel unrest in our bones, when others suffer – we feel the pain in our hearts. It costs us all life force, courage, and wholeness. We need the antidote – and the only antidote is the ability to envision that beautiful and possible world and lean toward it, work toward it with our whole beings.

The prophet Isaiah said: "everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

Through what Brueggemann called the Prophetic Imagination – the sorrow, the anguish, the unsettling recognition of the wide scope of suffering is only the

beginning place – where your mind becomes free enough to see beyond dry habit and expectation and see the forms and possibilities of something new – a world of fairness, generosity, beauty and love. That is hope – it is a different vision without which a future different from the past is impossible. That is the prophetic vision of the future. When you begin to glimpse that vision – you are participating in the prophetic spirit. With the remnants of the illusion of our private worlds, our individual fates torn away, so is cynicism. And that world for which we hunger is revealed as the only real option. Instead of drifting from snow storm to tsunami, from crisis to crisis, issue to issue, you can see to the heart of being – where the world is, in fact, one in all its stunning diversity. And when you see to the heart of being it is like eating a scroll of sacred words, being visited by wild angels, having your lips touched with holy fire and you will find both peace within and purpose all around. And hope beyond hope.

It is true – my brothers and sisters -- When we try to pick out anything by itself we find that it is bound fast by a thousand invisible cords that cannot be broken, to everything in the universe.