

**What is a Prophet? (Part Two) July 16, 2006**  
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**Amos 7:7-15, Mark 6:7-13**

This past week I went to two nearby retirement communities to offer a communion service as Harrison and I take turns doing every month. We go to the Classic Residence on Connecticut Ave. and to Maplewood Park on Old Georgetown Rd. Usually there are around 10-12 folks at each service – they seem gratified for our presence, and we are glad to go.

This past Wednesday and Thursday, my homily at both places was a summary of what my husband Bill said in his sermon here last Sunday – about being a prophet. I offered, with almost no embellishment, his definition: A prophet is someone who offers beneficial advice, drawn from one's own experience, at a crucial time to another. Very simple – a way of understanding prophecy as something we ourselves may occasionally be equipped to do or to receive.

The response from those elderly folks – who sometimes look utterly mystified or bored or who even nod off as I'm speaking – was heartening! They smiled and nodded vigorously; they seemed to hear the description of prophecy as something they could relate to - thinking back over their lives or even in this last season of their lives - beneficial advice, drawn from one's own experience (and the elderly have more of this rich resource than any of us!) beneficial advice, offered at a crucial time.

I would never have expected so much evident acceptance there of this way of thinking about prophecy. I had no idea that this ancient Biblical role of prophet could come alive for them in such down to earth terms. I thank Bill for his thinking on that. It has pushed me to want to explore further how we might think about prophecy today as something real and potent and constructive – as I think Bill's definition is.

One stumbling block to thinking about prophecy as a contemporary role can be some stereotypes we carry around that keep us from seeing any connection between so-called prophets and ourselves: They're crazy; they're radical; they hear voices and are maybe just nut cases. Probably that guy who stands on the corner of Mass. Ave. and 34<sup>th</sup> St. with his sign about abuse thinks he's a prophet. We want no part of such prophets.

Other contemporary prophets we much more easily accept, but we don't see them as in any way one of us. Nelson Mandela, MLK, Jr., to a newer and lesser extent perhaps even our newly elected Presiding Bishop Schori, at least based on some things she said at the close of our General Convention recently. I quote one such passage:

“Our invitation both in the last work of this Convention, and as we go out into the world, is to lay down our fear and love the world. Lay down our sword and shield, and seek out the image of God's beloved in the people we find it hardest to love...Lay down our need for power and control, and bow to the image of God's beloved in the weakest, the poorest, and the most excluded. We children can continue to squabble over the Inheritance. Or we can claim our name and heritage as God's beloveds and share that name, Beloved, with the whole world.”

And then there was that wonderful Methodist minister I heard in 1994 in a huge church in Memphis. She was a large black woman with a deep full voice. She sat sort of slumped in her seat, as if in reverie before the sermon. But then she rose up, entered the pulpit and literally seemed to receive the Spirit – moving and speaking with enormous power about the needs of the poor and our need to respond and what a sorry lot we are to hang back from compassion and change and more justice. Not a lecture, not a rant, but words that drew us deep into the lives of those we should be helping, making us want to help, want to do better, want to be better. When she was finished, she appeared to do a sort of brief dance – shaking her head and shoulders and arms, down to her fingertips – as if relieving herself of the grip of the Spirit and the burden of prophecy – before sinking back into her chair. I loved it! I not only responded to her words and wanted to follow them, I wanted to be like her! I wanted that power, that prophetic preaching style, even as I knew I could never pull it off – not at St. Mark’s, not here – the Spirit knows better than that! But this kind of prophecy can touch us, even if we can’t ourselves be prophets in that way.

The pendulum defining prophecy swings in a broad arc between the simple, direct advice from the heart of one to another who needs to hear it, to the highly dramatic prophecy described, oddly enough, by an early 20<sup>th</sup> century Quaker theologian named Thomas Kelly: “the meek and mild mediocrity of most of us stands in sharp contrast to that volcanic, upheaving, shaggy power of the prophets, whose descendents we were meant to be.”

So where do we find ourselves? I hate the idea of meek and mild mediocrity – but volcanic, upheaving, shaggy power? That’s kind of scary! If we’re to be descendents of prophets, what is our heritage, and how do we carry it on? Is there something common to all prophets?

Maybe this – a prophet is an agent for change – change for the better. A prophet helps bring about change – in the life of a friend, in a neighborhood, a church, a great country – an agent for change.

In this week’s readings, we meet such change agents, and they represent both ends of the pendulum’s swing. Amos is the volcanic, shaggy power type – literally shaggy. We imagine him a wild-eyed bearded shepherd in from the country with his plumb-line of justice and his harsh words for the king of Israel, warning that he could not count much longer on smooth times, that his country would need to change. Not surprisingly, the king didn’t want to hear it, and Amos was banished. The confronting, judgmental prophet may not get very far – even if his words later prove true. And then, the trap of “I told you so” lurks very near for prophets – then and now. Witness the frenzy these days of all those who warned against the war and predicted a bad outcome. Unsuccessful agents for change often seek solace in watching their warnings come true – probably sadness is the better part.

In the Gospel, we have a different kind of change agent – the disciples of Jesus, sent forth two by two, traveling light, given real authority, instructed to live off of those who received them and dismiss those who rejected them – shaking their dust from their feet (which was an ancient Jewish custom – a non-violent alternative response to rejection). They, like Amos, had a message of urgency – people needed to repent, and repentance meant and still means turn, go in a new direction – change. In addition to this message, the disciples themselves brought change. They healed and cured people – they helped.

So, for a prophet to be one who is an effective agent for change, there needs to be urgency; there needs to be responsibility and authority; the prophet needs to be a non-anxious presence – differentiated from but not disconnected from his or her community, and the prophet’s work must be helpful.

I think all of this fits with Bill's definition last week. Crucial times are times of urgency; responsibility is taken to offer advice, and one's authority is rooted in one's own experience. There is relationship, not separation between the prophet and her hearer, and the counsel given is beneficial – it helps, whether it is a no or a yes to what the advisor sees.

I think these same characteristics of prophecy are important for us at St. John's now – for our leadership and for all of us as we face a time of change that will impact our music and worship in this space for years to come. Urgency has been communicated. Change is not for its own sake, not to trouble smooth waters, but because of need. Responsibility has been shouldered by many, many people - the Vestry, the Organ Builder Selection Committee, the Architectural Review Committee, the Music Director Search Committee, and soon leadership for planning a capital campaign. The authority of these groups is grounded in experience, in educating themselves, informing themselves on all aspects of this project – the various options, the costs, the time-frame, the impact on our space, the additional needs to be addressed. These folks have met and e-mailed around the clock and visited organ builders and churches and have read and written and thought and prayed – the sheer volume of their activity is amazing! Finally, and most importantly, they are in communication with the rest of the parish. These leaders have offered numerous listening sessions; they have been non-anxious, receptive presences, sharing your concerns themselves. These leaders listen and speak to you out of their life experience at St. John's. The outside experts can give us the information we need, but only our own leadership can be effective agents for change, can make beneficial recommendations that will move us into the next phase of our life together.

We are at a crucial time. Are there prophets among us? You bet! They are as real and necessary here and now as they ever were. I hope we can embrace and respond to their counsel and their cautions and that whatever change is wrought here may prove to be good, and holy, life-giving to our worship here and inspiring our service in the world. Amen.