

Advent III Sermon

Prophetic Voices

All Saints Church Chelmsford
Sunday 16th December
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In the name of God, who teaches and leads us,
In the name of Christ, our companion on the way,
In the name of the Holy Spirit, who inspires and enfolds us,
Amen.

First I want to thank you for being invited to preach. I really appreciate this opportunity, and not all churches allow lay people this honor.

It is not often that two of our Sunday morning readings, the Hebrew Bible reading and the Gospel, provide us with such clear connections, and such clear themes, and as a neophyte preacher I am truly grateful! In these readings we have three prophets, Isaiah, our advent prophet, John, who prophesies the coming of the messiah, Jesus, and Jesus himself.

Let's begin with Isaiah. Isaiah is a prophet's prophet. He is the one who would be invited to speak at prophet conventions, who would be voted Prophetic voice of the year. The book of Isaiah, a whopping 66 chapters, is a central source for the season of Advent. We read the following messages – Wake up! He is coming, and no-one knows the day or the hour, so be ready! Wrongs will be righted, what was destroyed will be rebuilt. Sworn enemies will befriend one another, the lion will lie down with lamb, a child will play near the snake hole and not be hurt.

On the first Sunday of Advent, Matthew's gospel ends, "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." Last week's gospel told us of John preaching the coming of the Messiah and baptising people in the river. John's message is "repent, prepare the way of the Lord, and be baptized." I love the season of Advent because it seems to me that the readings point us in two very important directions – first, we have to be honest with ourselves and others the world is in a mess. There's a lot of work to do. But the second part is – if we work for God's kingdom, it could be a place of peace and beauty, of hope and vision.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is teaching and preaching and healing with his disciples, when he is visited by a group of John's disciples. John himself is in prison – being a prophet, when he heard that Herod intended to take a second wife without losing his first, and that she was married to his half-brother at the time, he has to speak out – and gets imprisonment, and ultimately death as his reward.

So, John sends his followers to ask Jesus an important question, maybe realizing that he might never get to ask it himself. You might think that seeing that dove rise over Jesus' head when he baptised him, hearing God's voice say 'this is my son' would be enough, but maybe prison has caused him to wonder if it was all worth it, all true. He wants to know if he got it right.

And what does Jesus say in reply to this question? "Go and tell John what you

hear and see.” And then he quotes Isaiah – “the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed.” And then he talks about John, saying “no-one has arisen greater than John the Baptist”, but first asking them, “what did you expect of this prophet?” In the Message translation of the Bible he says, “a weekend camper? A sheik in silk pajamas?” In other words, were you looking in the wrong place altogether?

One of the things I like to remember about Jesus is that he wasn't “backward about coming forward”, as we say back home. It must have been shocking to his listeners, because they knew what this prophesy foretold – it foretold the Messiah.

I have had an unexpected blessing in that I've been studying these readings for the last four weeks with the high school youth group at the other church I work at. Together we have been looking at the question, what is a prophet? We came up with this list:

A prophet is optimistic.

He (let's face it, prophets are almost entirely male in the Hebrew Bible) talks to God, and preaches to people.

A prophet has opinions, and good intentions

A prophet acts for good of the people.

A prophet risks being shunned, exiled, even killed; he might have to let go of being human for the sake of his message.

Even if a prophet dies, his voice continues; A prophet leaves a wake.

The young people felt strongly that in this day and age a prophet did not have to be religious – he or she can speak for all people. I then asked if anyone could think of someone they knew that they would count as a prophet. One of them, a member of our diocesan youth leadership council, volunteered our diocesan Youth Officer, Rob Bacon. She listed these qualities, his intensity, his openness, his emotional involvement and enthusiasm. “He wants to do everything he can to help the world”, she said.

Not all prophets are thrilled with the job God hands them. Remember Jonah, and how hard he tried to shake God off? One of the teenagers was really concerned about the average life expectancy of prophets. “Look at Martin Luther King”, he said. “Look at Gandhi. And he nearly starved himself to death voluntarily several times.” It is hard to imagine that God wants the ultimate sacrifice – but also important to realise that these people came to a place where they genuinely did not see death as a problem

Another thing we talked about in youth group is how there are two levels of prophets. You may remember that here at All Saints, you were invited to bring pictures of – men and women who had been saints to you in your faith journey. In this way we get to understand that, yes, there are Saints with a capital S, but there are also ordinary everyday folk who strive to do the best they can to lead and guide us. This is the same with prophets. We came up with the title, “prophetic voices” to describe this group. These are people who have come to us at some time in our life to help us on our way. So how is a prophet different from a saint? If I look at the prophetic voices in my life, a common theme I see is of people who feel no need to take things for granted, to accept the Status Quo. They are willing to look at things differently, to value ideas and people who are otherwise marginalised. These people often have ideas that are before their time, a new idea that will take many years to reach the mainstream.

Before he retired, my father was a minister in the Church of England for 35 years. He was always ahead of his time. He had a particular passion for lay ministry, and from his small church he sent out five or six people into leadership roles, some to be ordained, some to be christian educators, and some working for the diocese. Years later, when I

was in Seminary there was one class that I put off until the end, that subject that Episcopalians know nothing about, evangelism! But once the professor had explained the meaning of the word to us, I thought, “Oh, you mean what my father does!” From then on, while pondering on papers I would simply ask myself, what would Dad say? And every time I got an A!

My life has been blessed with many prophetic voices – people who have appeared in the right time, at the right place, with the right knowledge to get me to where God is taking me. These prophets have been all kinds of people. Some have been clergy. Some have not. Three of the most important have been gay men. One was a man old enough to be my grandfather, the man who worked to get me into the Boston University of Sacred music from across the sea. We hear these prophetic voices when we most need them. At exactly the moment when we are in the desert ourselves, looking desperately for food and drink, we suddenly hear a voice, and it is like home baked bread and fresh spring water to us.

John Hooker, a church musician, priest and professor, was a prophet to me. After I had had my second child, I thought I might write a simple guide to church music and children. But each time I spoke to John on the phone he would say something like, “this hymnal is so needed by the church!” No, I said, not a hymnal, just a guide, going through some resources. In our very next conversation he said, “I can’t wait to have this hymnal in my hands!” Finally, like Samuel, I got it, and spent the next three years compiling a hymnal, with John as my guide and advisor.

Recently I met a new prophetic voice. I’ve been struggling a while myself. I love the work I do in the church, but it’s become increasingly obvious that I need to get myself a “day job”, since much of the work I do, including my work here at ASC, is only a few hours a week. Over the last few years it’s been clear that the best transference of my skills would be to train as a classroom teacher, but somehow I hadn’t found the enthusiasm to get this idea going. I’ve been really praying on this, asking God to help me find the way, listening for His voice.

And then I went to my son’s 5th grade parent evening, and everything suddenly fell into place. Listening to his teacher was a transformative experience for me. He talked about how he loved teaching 5th graders, because they were at the pinnacle of their elementary experience, with the ability to look back and reflect on all they had learned. He talked about his program of “101 things to do in 5th grade”, all kinds of challenges like learn to tie knots; learn at least two new card games; host a party; learn to cook a meal; learn some simple phrases in three different languages. All of these were simply an excuse to get children thinking and writing he said, but they didn’t know that.

By the end of the session I was humming with life and enthusiasm, so, in my characteristically shy and retiring way, I introduced myself, said I was thinking of getting into teaching, and asked if I could spend one day a week in the classroom. I now go in two days, have a teaching block all to myself which he supervises and critiques for me, and just to prove that God is laughing, I have discovered that Lesley University offers a collaborative accelerated teaching degree – which can be done in connection with another elementary school in my home town.

Now, what fascinates me about all this is that a total stranger would say Yes to me. Because saying yes is, I believe, an essential quality of a prophetic voice, a fundamental message from God. We need someone to tell us what can be, to tell us it’s time to get on and do it, not to ask questions about whether we’re well enough qualified, or what we’re afraid of. We need someone who believes that we can do it.

But what about this community of All Saints Chelmsford? Where are the prophetic voices we need to listen here? I would suggest that they are the voices of our children and youth. A highway is being built, in the wonderful foundation the Church School has begun to provide for children up to 5th grade. But there the highway stops. Many young people would have decided that since their needs are not being met here, they will go elsewhere. I would suggest that the fact that they have not done that, that they have stayed around with the hope that something will be done for them, is a message that we need to listen to. We also need to listen to those who are thinking of becoming involved in this ministry, as well as those who have served for several years, and may be feeling tired and under-appreciated.

So I ask you, in this season of Advent and always, to listen for the voice of God in your everyday life, and particularly to listen for God's voice as we build up a program for the young people of All Saints.