**Prophetic Voices**

**Deuteronomy 18:15-20**

**Parkminster United Church – Sunday, January 31, 2021**

Last week, like many of you, I watched the presidential inauguration in The United States. I was mesmerized by Amanda Gorman, whose poem *The Hill We Climb* left me in awe of its wisdom, beauty, and honesty. It was noted in one article that “the young Harvard grad was sharing a stage with leaders multiple times her age, leaders who have steered [the US] into and out of disasters of monumental consequence, often in the name of American exceptionalism. Gorman spoke her commanding truth to all that power – that healing the wounds of the past should become part of the American identity” (Karen Attiah, *“Amanda Gorman reminds us that poetry is not a luxury”, The Washington Pos*t, January 21, 2021.)

On that day, we witnessed a modern-day prophet among us.

Who are the prophets in our midst?

In this morning’s reading from the book of Deuteronomy, Moses said to the people:

God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; to that prophet you must listen. (Deuteronomy 18:15)

First, a little background: The book of Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Hebrew Scriptures; it is also the fifth and final book of the Torah or the Pentateuch, which is what biblical scholars call the first five books of the Old Testament – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The word Torah is Hebrew for “instruction” or “teaching” and Pentateuch has the suffix, “penta,” which means five. The Torah or Pentateuch is where Jewish laws and customs can be found. These five books contain a narrative that extends from creation through the death of Moses.

Some of us may recall the beginning of Moses’ story. He was born to a Levite woman who hid him in a basket made of reeds and left him on the riverbed to save his life. He was rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter, who eventually took him in as her son. As an adult, God appeared to Moses in a burning bush; Moses then led his people out of slavery in Egypt and was given the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai.

All of this happened in the book of Exodus (the second book of the Bible), but Moses’ narrative is much longer. Chronicles of Moses’ life and ministry continues through the next three books of the bible, which is where we come into the story today. We enter scripture today at the end of the Torah or Pentateuch. We come into the story near the end of Moses’ time; he dies shortly after this passage, after he gave his final blessing to Israel at the end of the book of Deuteronomy.

So, let’s go back to my question: who are the prophets in our midst? The voices that speak pure truth, that challenge and disrupt the status quo, that ultimately guide us to a better place?

Moses knew that his time was coming to an end, but he assured the people that they would not be left alone. That even in his absence, God would make sure that there was a prophet in their midst.

In doing so, I think Moses was also assuring the generations of people that would come after him – those that God would also be in covenant with – that THEY would never be alone.

And that includes us.

This is not just a promise that God made to the people thousands of years ago; this is a promise made to us, a promise that continues to be made. This passage speaks of a promise that there will always be voices that will lead, challenge and guide. God promises that a prophet will be raised up in our midst.

But this calls to a question that is as relevant for us as it was for those ancient Israelites. Who speaks for God?

There are lots of people who claim to speak for God today. We just have to look to the January 6th attack on the U.S Capitol Building. And specifically, to the version of Christianity that was on display. A version that saw no contradiction between “Jesus Saves” slogans and lethally violent assaults against unarmed leaders. There are those who claim divine direction to perpetuate the violence enabled by everyday racism, by the polite indignation of politicians and leaders, by disregard for the wisdom of science and public health measures, by silence, by those claiming to be prophets in our midst.

Who speaks for God? Just as there are those who have abused this concept of prophetic call, there have also been those for whom this promise has been fulfilled. Throughout the years many individuals have had profound and prophetic impacts on our communities and on our world. They have, sometimes against all odds, risen into leadership positions, spoken out against inequalities and prayed for peace while at the same time demanding justice. Time and time again, history has proven to us that Moses’ words were true, that a prophet would be sent into our midst. Who would you consider our modern-day prophets?

I think of the voices of young people that have emerged as the prophets who are sounding the alarm and pleading for urgent action to preserve the planet. Greta Thunberg of Sweden was only 15 when she skipped school on a Friday and began a solitary witness outside the Swedish parliament, demanding bold action on climate change. Eventually, Greta’s action caught the attention of the media and, before long, school children around the world were participating in “Fridays for the Future” actions.

Here in Canada, we hear voices like Autumn Peltier, the young Anishinaabe teenager from Manitoulin Island, a prophet calling attention to the need to honour and protect water. In 2018, at the age of 13, she addressed the UN General Assembly as it launched the UN International Decade for Action on Water for Sustainable Development.

God continues to raise up people of all ages as prophets and leaders that urge us to live according to God’s way – seeking justice, pursuing peace, and honouring all creation. Prophets may challenge us with what may seem dire; but they always lead us to hope. “Prophetic faith is elementally hopeful that something better is intended by God and will come to fruition” (Walter Brueggemann.)

Let’s turn back to our reading for a moment because there is something I do not want us to overlook:

Today’s reading says: God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people.

As Moses prepared for his earthly life to end, God made a covenant with people of every generation that they would never be left without someone to guide them. God promised to empower the people to do the work that needed to be done. This means that there is a prophet in our midst.

Last week, we explored the theme of call – and this connects with what we are talking about today. There are prophetic voices in our midst. And those voices belong to all of you. I am talking about the ability that each and every one of you has within yourself to be a leader in this church, in your families, in this community and in this world. I am talking about the ways that God is calling us – the ways that God created us – to rise up and make a real difference.

The assurance that God will call a prophet into every generation isn’t just referring to people in vocational ministry or even the people who are prophetic in public settings. I think that this scripture was also referring to ordinary people that God is calling to rise up to do extraordinary things.

As a community of faith, as seekers, we are guided by teachings such as “treat your neighbours as yourself” and “what you do to the least of these, you do to me.” We are guided by the words of the prophets who tell us to “do justice and love kindness” and “repair what has been broken”.

This is some powerful stuff.

Of course, I am not saying that we are called to be like Moses and lead an entire generation of people out of Egypt, through the wilderness and into the Promised Land, but I am saying that Moses was an ordinary person, called by God to do extraordinary things. Things that not only changed his life, but also changed the lives of others.

And we, too, are called to rise up.

In a world that is far from perfect, we are called to look around and make visible the invisible signs of God’s grace. In this challenging time – and in all times - we are called to inspire, to comfort, to protect, to encourage and to love others. We are called to show tangible proof – even if we must fight desperately to find it sometimes – of hope in this world. We are called to rise up and be prophets in our time – in ways both big and small.

We are called to be a living expression of that good news in our lives. I have said it before, and I will say it again – we need to share the good news because this is news that is worth sharing.

We are living in a time in need of prophets who will rise up. When the world continues to struggle against a pandemic and Canada, among other nations, are called to confront the deep-rooted systems of racism and injustice, of deliberate misinformation, of climate devastation, and hostility to science, we need voices that will speak up and speak out and be agents of change and hope. We have the power to proclaim something that is good, something that is faithful and something that is everlasting. We – ordinary people living our ordinary lives – have the power to do something extraordinary.

So, rise up, prophets of Parkminster. Let hope be in all that you say and do. Rise up!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rev. Heather Power