

Sorting Through the Prophets-Jeremiah 1: 4-10 (January 30, 2022-4th Sunday after Epiphany)

If you're tired of Winter, you might be paying attention to the furry, buck-toothed prophet of Wiarnton next week. Next Tuesday February 2nd is Groundhog Day. Willie of Wiarnton fame will, based on the existence or non-existence of his shadow, prophesy the length of the winter season. I call Willie a prophet with tongue in cheek only because that's what we've been conditioned to think of as the role of the prophet; someone who can see into the future. Certainly, that's an aspect of biblical prophecy but only a small aspect.

In scripture, Prophets are people who see the world as the arena of God's activity and have the vision to spot where God's work is being thwarted.¹ They point those places out to us. It's not always that easy though sorting out the true from the false prophets. So much damage has been done by those who claim to be prophets of God from any number of faiths. Yet, we've also benefited from the prophetic lives of people Martin Luther King Junior, Gandhi, Dorothy Day, the Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Thomas Berry and more recently the Indigenous voices of Cindy Blackstock and Murray Sinclair. There are also secular prophets, people who aren't grounded in a faith tradition but nonetheless through their integrity and courage point us to visions of a just society and where we are falling short of our human potential to live lives of love, Greta Thunberg, David Suzuki, Harvey Milk, Amanda Gorman. The question is how do we sort the true ones from the false ones?

The story of Jeremiah's call gives us some clues. It begins with the phrase, "Now the word of the Lord came to me..." Here is the first clue that a prophet is legitimate; the call to become a prophet is always disruptive to the life of the one being called. Becoming a prophet does not involve a clear meticulously planned career path. You are going along doing what you do and, something happens, or a dawning realization of injustice takes hold that speaks to the deepest part of you and causes you to change direction, to respond to a call to speak God's truth. Gandhi was on his way to becoming a lawyer, Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Junior had a comfortable life as a Baptist Pastor, Malala Yousufzai just wanted to go to school, Jeremiah was on his way to following in his family footsteps and becoming a temple priest.

The call of Jeremiah is one of the most beautiful and poetic in the bible. This notion of God knowing us even before we were placed in our mother's womb is a beautifully intimate one. When it comes to true and false prophets that first word, 'before', in the phrase--"Before I formed you in the womb..." is an important one. The call to prophecy isn't a matter of choice; rather it is something that is thrust upon the person. It isn't a matter of grandiose pre-destination but rather a lack of choice. Think of Jesus' word in Gethsemane asking God to take the cup away from him. The true prophet enters the work reluctantly. Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Junior describes himself as being "catapulted" into leadership², which is an apt image. The true prophet does the work because it needs to be done to

¹Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes*, pp. 158 & 161.

²Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Junior, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963.
http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

be able to live with integrity in their community and their world. The true prophet doesn't stand out to be a celebrity. In fact, the true prophet would prefer to be doing something else completely with their lives because it is often done at great personal, social, and financial risk. The examples are numerous, King, Gandhi, Milk were all assassinated.

What is common to just about all call stories in the bible is some expression by the one being called of their own inadequacy in the face of the task before them. Jeremiah is no different: "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." The true prophet enters and performs the work with a sense of humility, so they constantly work at setting their ego aside, listening, and watching for the leading of the Spirit. True prophets tend to build communities, movements and coalitions that draw on the gifts and energies of others. I think of the Rev. William Barber from North Carolina and his Poor People's Campaign and Moral Mondays movement. The true prophet is humble; they know that others have a part to play as well.

There is an inner strength to true prophets, a spiritual strength. In verse eight God continues the assurance to Jeremiah: "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you..." True prophets rely on a reservoir of deep faith to sustain them, a faith that they are but one expression of God's work and it will continue even if they are destroyed. True prophets have a long view of history, of their place in the universe, of both their significance and insignificance. Dorothy Day, the late Roman Catholic champion of the poor and social activist put it this way; Our Faith is stronger than death... and the spread of the Kingdom of God upon the earth is more inspiring and more compelling."³

Now we get to a tough one—verse ten says that the prophet's job is to "pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Like you, I am well aware of the plucking up and tearing down, of the destroying and overthrowing that has been done by those believing themselves to be prophets. Just think of anything done by ISIS. Think of the damage done to our First Nations peoples by the Church. But on the other hand, true prophets of God's ways aren't always nice either; they are disruptive, they upset people, they expose the divisions that lie beneath the veneer of calm, they seek to destroy unjust institutions and overthrow oppressive powers. Think of the words attributed to Jesus; "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."⁴ A true prophet values order as well, but not at the cost of justice.⁵ A true prophet knows that order can be deceiving, a way of hiding from reality. A true prophet breaks the calm surface to allow suppressed tensions to be named and seen, so that they can be dealt with constructively. A false prophet incites chaos to create fear and gain power. False prophets that are grounded in religion have a static understanding of God, a God who is locked into a scripture, who at one time laid down some rules that must be followed for all time by all people. False prophets use God for their own ends. A true prophet has a dynamic understanding of God, a God who is active and working in the world, a flowing river of love that will nourish everything in its path if allowed to flow. False prophets have God as their mascot. True prophets have God as their Lord.

³ Dorothy Day, <http://www.quoteland.com/author/Dorothy-Day-Quotes/1766/>

⁴ Matthew 10: 34, NRSV.

⁵ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Junior, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963. http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

This business of sorting the true and the false prophets is not an easy one; it requires discernment on our part. The grace or the gift in the discernment is to be led away from the many things that distract us from God's call and presence in our world. The gift will be to be led into right relationship with the world, relationships of justice, mutuality, and reciprocity. Another way of saying it is that the gift in discerning the true prophet is to be led to wholeness, to that place of integrity where there is no separation between God and God's creation, where we are recognized and recognize ourselves to be part of a greater, beautiful whole. The gift is to be led to that place of unity where we were known even before we entered our mother's womb. May God bless our discernment. I invite you to consider who you see as prophets in our time, other than Warton Willie, I invite you to share some names in the chat if you like.

Rev. Joe Gaspar