

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
January 29, 2012
Deuteronomy 18:15-20

“...God will raise up for you a prophet”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Are co-incidences ever really co-incidences? Or are the remarkable things that seem to happen by chance manifestations of that mysterious energy we call God's grace?

I ask myself this question often when some wonderful and dramatic “co-incidence” occurs in my life. I pause and think: co-incidence or grace? Usually I detect God's fingerprints all over the supposed co-incidence and so I say out loud: “I caught you!”

This past week I experienced one of those moments of grace masquerading as co-incidence. Here is what happened...

Sometime during Advent, my friend Beverly Daniel Tatum (the President of Spelman College in Atlanta) and I agreed that in the New Year we would meet in Washington DC and together visit the new Martin Luther King Memorial. Having spent many years co-leading seminars on dismantling racism, we thought seeing the Memorial together was a fitting Christmas gift to give each other. The plan was made and the date set: meet in DC on January 24th.

I chose a train, packed for my trip, and I carefully included a Bible with my luggage so I could read the Lectionary passages for today on the trip down and work on my sermon.

Imagine my surprise when, settled on the train, I looked up the assigned Scripture readings for today and found the passage from Deuteronomy...a passage in which Moses tells the Israelites that God will raise from among them a prophet, like him, to lead God's people. In the passage for today, Moses is assuring his people that another prophet will follow him to inspire and lead...listen again:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: 'If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.' ¹⁷Then the Lord replied to me: 'They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet,* who shall speak to them everything that I command.*

Deuteronomy 18:15-18

There I was: reading those words on a train traveling to Washington DC to be with my friend and to see, together, the Martin Luther King Memorial. Moses' amazing words washed over me. How true, I thought, how important and how real. Moses told God's people that God would "raise up for you a prophet" like himself "from among the people" and that the people "shall heed such a prophet." Moses was right and God was faithful. Martin Luther King, Jr. was raised up from among his people—a prophet and a visionary to lead God's people to a new Promised Land.

Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness for forty years, and he mediated between God and God's people. Moses was a prophet and here he is reassuring the Hebrew people that after he dies, God will raise another prophet from among them to lead them.

Moses and King are but two in the long line of prophets God has raised up from among God's people—there is a long and powerful tradition of prophetic witness. Over millennia—from ancient times up through today—God has raised up from among God's people special individuals to speak in a courageous, prophetic way, to break new ground, to lead, inspire, disturb, encourage and move humanity forward.

In my mind, a prophet is someone who speaks simple truths that are initially ridiculed and dismissed but later found to be obvious, accepted and embraced.

The Bible says that God will raise up from among the people prophets who will speak God's words. "I will put my words in their mouths," the Bible tells us.

Our beloved brother Martin King seemed to have God's very words placed in his mouth. King spoke God's words about justice and fairness, equality and dignity, community and peace. And King was mocked, scorned, dismissed, harassed, feared, followed, arrested, and killed. Being a prophet is frightening and dangerous. Prophets are not usually safe, nor are they popular.

The wisdom and courage of prophets like Martin Luther King, Jr. take your breath away and that might be why the Martin Luther King Memorial is so massive. It takes your breath away. Rising up from the shore of the tidal basin, the memorial is enormous...to view it you look up with awe at the figure of a great man who appears to be stepping right out of the granite. Etched at the base of the memorial are King's words: "Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope."

Moses' words about God raising up a prophet is not some ancient anomaly that occurred long ago and far away. God has been raising up prophets since the time of Moses...brave women and men who foretell and predict, nudge and inspire, and **help usher in God's promised Shalom**. Those called to prophetic witness were raised up in ancient times and they have been raised up since throughout the centuries.

*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me
from among your own people...*

Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, Sojourner Truth, Rachel Carson,
Dorothy Day, Vaclav Havel, Nelson Mandela, Chief Seattle.

...and you shall heed such a prophet...

Rabbi Abraham Heschel, Gloria Steinem, William Sloane Coffin,
Richard Rohr, Ralph Abernathy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Pablo Neruda,
Frances Crowe.

¹⁶*This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb
on the day of the assembly...*

Gandhi, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Billy Graham, Marion Wright Edelman,
Harvey Milk, Sister Helen Prejean, John Muir, Bill McKibben.

*and I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them
everything that I command.*

Joan of Arc, John Woolman, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Bishop John Shelby Spong,
Abraham Lincoln, Oscar Romero, A.J. Muste, Bayard Rustin.

Prophets recognize and feel the despair and hopelessness around them, and yet they speak, lead, act and encourage despite the evidence—and they watch the evidence change. Prophets imagine and envision, dream and believe, **and help usher in God's promised Shalom**.

The meaning of the Hebrew root for *prophet* is uncertain but it is most likely “one who is called” OR “one who calls.” According to David Forney of Columbia Theological Seminary, “The combination of “called” and “calls”...is helpful in understanding the prophet’s twofold role. First, the prophet is the moral and ethical agent who summons the people to repentance; second the prophet anticipates what YHWH will do in the covenant.”

The prophet, called by God, in turn calls the community back into alignment, back to our covenant with God. The prophet shares words of vision, hope and promise for the community, for the future, to create the kingdom of God on earth.

William Carl III of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, writes movingly about how we need vessels, no matter how earthen, through which God can speak and communicate “the blessed message of love.” The goal of prophets, according to Rev. Carl, “is to be the window through which the light of God shines.”

“...a window through which the light of God shines...” that certainly describes our beloved Jesus. If I asked you all to call out names to describe Jesus, we would hear a long list...rabbi, healer, brother, teacher, savior, friend, good shepherd, and so on. We would not all agree on every title...but I think we would all agree that our Jesus was a **prophet**. Jesus was a good and faithful Jew. He stood in the long line of prophets who came before him: Joshua, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Amos, Obadiah, Micah and there were many more. Jesus grew up hearing the stories from the Torah of these prophets and how they **helped usher in God’s promised Shalom**.

Jesus stepped into that tradition, he accepted that mantle, he spoke with a prophetic voice. And like his brother Martin King, a prophet who would quote him often two millennia later, Jesus was mocked, scorned, dismissed, harassed, feared, followed, arrested and killed.

We remember that Jesus did not say “worship me,” he said “follow me.” Such a tall order, such a life-changing calling. But Jesus was clear. “Worship me” would have been easier, but Jesus said “follow me” and as his contemporary disciples we can do no less.

And so we must both acknowledge and embrace our calling. Maybe we cannot and will not be prophets recognized around the world. But if we are Jesus-followers, we are called to be prophetic. That means we too must speak, act, and teach always trying to **help usher in God’s promised Shalom**.

Being prophetic does not mean we must be predictive, prognostic, apocalyptic, or foresee the future. It means we give voice, directly, consistently and bravely to the world Jesus envisioned when he spoke, relentlessly, about the kingdom of God. It means in the face of a world that values profits over people, discounts children, condones violence, glorifies war, and pillages the environment, we are called to seek peace, work for justice, increase love, show compassion, practice generosity, care for those on the margins of power, and be faithful stewards of Creation. Not easy, not popular, not always safe. But that is being prophetic, and that is our calling.

We may not be prophets known around the world for our inspiring rhetoric and heroic efforts, but we are called to be **prophetic** and make a difference in our own spheres of influence. Jesus did not say be famous, become legendary, be known. Jesus said "follow me" and that means do what I Jesus have done...work to create the kingdom of God on earth....help me **usher in God's promised Shalom**.

We stand with Jesus, King, Gandhi, Mandela, Tutu, Bonhoeffer, Lincoln, Coffin and Romero in a long line of prophets called to speak truth to power. We may not have the international platforms they had and we may not be as influential and powerful as they were, but nonetheless we are called to hold and voice a prophetic vision, to witness with our lives, and to live with a sense of Christian integrity.

And we need not despair, we are not called to FINISH the work of creating the kingdom of God on earth. We are called to do what is ours to do. I find these words from the Talmud helpful: "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to avoid doing your part."

I am not gazing out at a congregation of famous prophets. But I am gazing out at a congregation of ordinary individuals called to the extraordinary work of being prophetic. You know this. And you live it. Bless you. Keep doing what you are doing, and work to deepen your commitment to prophetic witness. Jesus calls you to this work, and the world needs your voice, your light, and your actions.

Hear now in closing the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador:

It helps now and then to step back and take a long view...
We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection...

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water the seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs.

We are the prophets of a future not our own.

Amen.

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