

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
January 16, 2011
Isaiah 49:1-7

“Isaiah and King: Prophets Old and New”

*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.*

*Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The Lord called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.
And he said to me, 'You are my servant...
in whom I will be glorified.'*

This is the prophet Isaiah speaking, in the classic language of the Hebrew Scriptures. Isaiah delivers a hymn to his own sense of vocation as God's prophet. God called Isaiah and made his mouth "like a sharp sword," to speak the oracles of God to the people of Israel.

Now listen to the same verses from the Book of Isaiah from **The Message**, the Bible in contemporary language, translated by Eugene Peterson:

*Listen, far-flung islands,
pay attention, faraway people:
God put me to work from the day I was born.
The moment I entered the world he named me.
He gave me speech that would cut and penetrate.
He kept his hand on me to protect me.
He made me his straight arrow
and hid me in his quiver.
He said to me, "You are my dear servant...
through whom I will shine."*

In both translations of the Bible, the meaning is clear...Isaiah understands he has been called to be a prophet in his time, to bring a prophetic voice to the people of Israel.

In ancient Israel, prophesy served to connect the human community with God, permitting worshipers to discern God's will—particularly during times of social or political crisis. Prophets were central to the life of faithful people in ancient time, linking humanity and God—explaining and mediating God's intentions to reward, punish or rescue God's mortal beings. Prophets were believed to be called individually and specifically by God and used by God to convey God's oracles or words. In today's passage we hear Isaiah reflecting on being chosen by God, "The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me."

In the Hebrew Bible, three prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel—are ranked as Major Prophets because of the length of their work captured in the Old Testament AND because of their enormous theological influence. Throughout the Book of Isaiah, we see that the prophet was faithful to his call and faithful to God. Although not always popular or revered, Isaiah denounced the greed of the ruling class and their disregard for the poor. He spoke with passion about how the people of Israel needed to deepen their faith and rely totally on Yahweh's (God's) power to lead them and to save them. Isaiah also predicted that an heir of David would establish universal peace and justice. During the exile, Isaiah spoke of God's hope that the people of Israel would one day return to their homeland in Palestine. AND, woven throughout all his prophesy, Isaiah was critical of the community's religious failures and shortcomings. He was outspoken in his criticism, giving truth to his words when he said that God "made my mouth like a sharp sword."

Isaiah and all the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures were empowered by God to preach, prophesy, teach, guide, admonish, counsel, and warn. They were bold and often disliked. When the prophets shared an oracle or prophesy that people liked, they were considered infallible and respected. When they shared an oracle or prophesy people did not like, or did not want to hear, or was critical of the community, the prophets were discounted and threatened.

Today, many people of faith believe that prophets only existed in ancient times—that they are a colorful and important part of our religious heritage but not a relevant part of our modern lives. Today, on this Martin Luther King Sunday, I want to name The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a prophet, every bit an instrument of God as the prophets of old.

I want us to understand that Martin King was a prophet as fully and as deeply as the prophets in ancient time. Like them, King was called and empowered by God to share a prophetic vision. And like the prophets of old, King was welcomed and revered when he said things that people wanted to hear, and despised and threatened when he was critical, or considered too militant.

Martin Luther King was not just a courageous leader, a social change activist, a fine orator, and a visionary man—he certainly was all those things—but first and foremost he was a Christian. Martin Luther King was not a social and political activist who happened to be a person of faith. Martin Luther King was a social and political activist BECAUSE he was a person of faith. He was primarily a Baptist preacher—his analysis, actions, speeches, organizing, civil disobedience, and commitment to nonviolence were all rooted in his Christian faith.

Sometimes the good pastor is referred to only as Dr. King. When we do that we strip him of the central motivating force in his life, the core of his personhood, the essential quality of his leadership. Martin Luther King was a person of faith, a minister. He was not the leader of a social change movement because he had a Ph.D. He was the leader of a social change movement because he was a Rev.

Like Isaiah, Martin Luther King was called by God—while in his mother’s womb, God named him. God made his mouth like a sharp sword and made him a polished arrow to be sent into the world. Or, using the words of Eugene Peterson from **The Message**, God put King to work from the day he was born, the moment King entered the world God named him. God gave him speech that would cut and penetrate.

Like Isaiah, King was revered and reviled. Like Isaiah, King was admired and attacked. Like Isaiah, King was respected and rejected. And like Isaiah, King spoke not just about ONE issue but about the many social and political issues of his time. For King, it was civil rights, poverty, human rights and war.

Rev. King became a civil rights activist early in his career. He led the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957.

He led the 1963 March on Washington where he delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech—which you heard excerpts from at the start of our worship service today. Anyone who studies the life and work of Martin Luther King is struck by his reliance on Biblical inspiration for his leadership and his oratory.

His language, his cadence, his delivery were all steeped in the Biblical tradition. For King, the powerful language and commanding images that he used were not academic, they were totally real and personal to him. King was an iconic figure in the advancement of civil rights not only in this country but around the world and the basis of his work was Jesus' nonviolent approach and the teachings of Gandhi.

Rev. King's civil rights work was embraced by people of African descent in this country and globally and he was tolerated and sometimes supported by white people. However, when in 1965, Rev. King made his first public statements against the Vietnam War he suffered harsh attacks from the White House and the press. The criticism of his anti-war stance was so brutal, and his fears that he would divide the civil rights community were so great, that King downplayed his anti-war rhetoric for two full years. During that time, he was restless and agitated about the war. Close colleagues have written that Rev. King wrestled constantly with the issue of the Vietnam War and was eager to draw the connections between war, racism and poverty.

After two years of relative silence, King spoke out again against the war and his words were like a sharp sword. The stormy spring of 1967 marked a turning point for Rev. Martin King, the anti-war movement, President Lyndon Johnson and the nation. The violence in Vietnam was increasing and so were the frequency and intensity of the urban riots in this country. Rev. King stepped forward and emerged as the leader of two movements: the Civil Rights Movement and the Peace Movement. His double consciousness allowed him to see the peace movement and the civil rights movement as one movement....**the peace and justice movement.**

But leading two movements, even though the movements informed and influenced each other, was exhausting and almost debilitating for Rev. King. The weight on Martin King and the pressure he experienced was almost unbearable. As his anti-war work became more and more demanding and his actions in the peace movement more and more bold, King lost supporters, donors to the SCLC, and even advisors. But he did not back down. In fact, throughout 1967, despite almost incapacitating pressure, King became increasingly courageous, speaking out against the war and trying to link racism, militarism and poverty in every speech. He joined with Dr. Benjamin Spock in launching Vietnam Summer—an effort to mobilize thousands of students to go door-to-door and educate their communities about the war, and build the mainstream opposition he felt was essential to stop the war. AND King took a further step and advocated outright resistance to the draft.

During this time, Rev. King was verbally attacked, mercilessly, in the media.

And how did he respond?... by quoting the Beatitudes from the Bible... *Jesus said, Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*”

When challenged about why he had the authority to criticize American foreign policy, King responded: “I answered a call, and when God speaks, who can but prophesy?” A Baptist preacher first and social activist second, King called upon Americans to **repent**. “The kingdom of God is at hand,” he said in more than one speech. He believed God was saying to America: You are too arrogant. He quoted scripture and said on camera without flinching, “If you don’t change your ways, God will rise up and break the backbone of your power.” King believed Americans must take up the cross, humble themselves, denounce the war, and embrace peace. “Before the crown we wear,” he said with conviction, “there is the cross we must bear.” He believed we must achieve the genuine integration, as he called it, of true equality, the redistribution of economic and political power, and the love of peace.

By the end of 1967, Rev. King announced, “...we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights.” He spoke about reconciling the two poles of individualism and collectivism and he said he believed the shift in focus from civil rights to human rights more deeply reflected his underlying Biblical values. King spoke openly about bringing together his civil rights, human rights and peace movement leadership **with his own ongoing spiritual journey**. He referred to Jesus, and spoke about the difference between a “reform movement” and a “revolutionary movement.”

On April 4, 1968, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was gunned down on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee at the age of 39. He died a hero and a prophet.

The list of the awards and honors King received during his lifetime fills page after page after page, and the recognition, awards and honors he received posthumously fills many, many more pages. While alive, Rev. King spoke about what he would like people to say at his funeral. Listen to his words,

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others.

I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question.

I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked.

I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. And I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major. Say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter.

Today we remember a fallen leader, a visionary man, a disciple of Christ, a brave martyr, and a beloved servant of God. We recognize that the call to be a prophet, a spokesperson for God, did not begin and end in ancient times. Like Isaiah, God called Martin Luther King and put him to work from the day he was born. Like Isaiah, God named King from the moment he entered the world and gave him speech that would cut and penetrate. And like Isaiah, God made King his arrow and sent him into the world to preach, prophesy, teach, guide, admonish, counsel, and warn.

In the Book of Isaiah, God says to Isaiah, *'You are my servant...in whom I will be glorified.'* Eugene Peterson translates that same verse as *"You are my dear servant...through whom I will shine."*

God did shine through Martin Luther King, Jr.—courageous prophet of our time. From him we were inspired and we learned. He opened our eyes and changed our lives. And we recognize that God was at the center of his life, the center of his movements, the center of his vision, and the center of his actions.

Today we honor the fact that King was called to be a prophet and that he had the courage to respond. Like the prophets of old, King told the truth even when it was

hard for him to say and hard for us to hear.

His words, legacy, and dream live on and we must continue his work.

Like King, we are people of faith. Like King, we are called to take up hard tasks and to speak difficult truths. Like King, we must be clear in our vision, brave in our actions, and cling to our faith through the storms of our times.

On this day, we remember the prophet Martin Luther King, Jr.

As the people of Central America say when they remember and honor a martyr, MARTIN LUTHER KING, PRESENTE!! Amen.

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