



Called to Be Prophets
Isaiah 49:1-7, Psalm 40:1-11, John 1:29-42
Rev. Beverly A. Bartlett
January 19, 2020
2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

If one pays any attention at all to the news and the events of our day, it can be a challenge to hold on to hope, to see a way forward that leads in a positive direction, to discern where God is at work, to find evidence that love is indeed stronger than fear or death, truth more powerful than lies, and compassion stronger than apathy or hate. We are on the verge of an impeachment trial that among other things continues to reveal how deeply divided we are. Our government is in such disarray that I find myself amazed that things keep running at all. The fires in Australia are so massive that scientists say their smoke has made it all the way around the world and back to where it started. Antisemitism, racism, xenophobia, and nationalism are all on the rise—not just in this country but in many other countries as well. More troops have been deployed to the Middle East. And closer to home, there are more homeless people in the city than ever before. As I go on my nightly walks with the dog around the neighborhood, I am saddened and alarmed by just how many people are asleep on the sidewalk and how many shop entrances on Madison Avenue are converted into cardboard bedrooms overnight. As super tall buildings rise across mid-town, the city's lack of affordable housing grows along with them. Friends struggle to find adequate employment in spite of the official job numbers. Some of us have family members facing recent cancer diagnoses. Many are wrestling with how to care for aging and increasingly dependent loved ones in a society that values youth and puts too few resources into caring for those who have grown old. Psychologists tell us that the numbers of people coming to see them who are struggling with anxiety and stress have spiked dramatically in the past three

years. I feel sure all of us are touched in some way by anxiety, fear or grief.

The Psalms of lament where God's people cry out, "How long, O Lord?" "Why have you forgotten us?" are songs many of us can appreciate and make our own. And though it is not easy to dwell on our anxieties and fears, though you may be wondering why in the world I am starting this sermon in such a depressing way, there is a place for lament. In fact, the Biblical scholar, professor and writer, Walter Brueggemann says, in his class book *The Prophetic Imagination*, that grieving is the first, critical step towards hope. Unless you break through numbness of simply accepting things as they are, and see that things are indeed not okay, you can't begin to imagine an alternative.ⁱ In order to envision a hopeful, life-giving path, you first have to see, express and grieve all that is not right, everything that is working against life. On this weekend when we celebrate and remember the life and prophetic ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the ways in which we can honor his work is to recognize that it is not over. We haven't yet achieved the world he dreamed of where all people are treated equally, and places of injustice have been transformed into his envisioned oases of "freedom and justice."ⁱⁱ As he wrote in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, which we (will discuss) discussed in the Adult Education class this morning, "Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of [those] willing to be coworkers with God."ⁱⁱⁱ Sometimes we are lulled into thinking that progress does indeed roll in inevitability, and recognizing that it doesn't, that it hasn't, that there is still a long way to go, is a critical step. We have to

have our eyes opened to all that is not right before we have any hope of living into a different world.

So, yes, I began this sermon by reminding us that there is much over which to lament. There are many ways in which we are living in a wilderness time. But it is in wilderness times that we can hear God speak more clearly, that we can envision something new, that the prophets of hope can break through to us. Isaiah, Psalm 40, which we sang, and even today's gospel passage all point to hope and restoration, to a new thing that God is bringing about in the midst of what feels hopeless. The Psalmist says the Lord, "heard my cry and drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God." Whatever wilderness the Psalmist has been through, God heard them and restored them. In the gospel lesson, John the Baptist quotes Isaiah saying he is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord!' God's people of his day were in the wilderness of the Roman occupation, living under an oppressive system, and John points them to Jesus, saying "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." John testifies and directs them to the one who brings salvation—new life and different way of living in this world.

Today's passage from Isaiah comes from the portion of the book known as second Isaiah, which begins with chapter 40. This is a completely different prophet from Isaiah, son of Amoz, of the first part of Isaiah. A century or two has passed since Isaiah, son of Amoz, prophesied. This prophet of second Isaiah, of whom we have no personal information, not even a name, is with the people of Jerusalem that were taken into Babylon. He is the prophet of hope in the wilderness of exile. Jerusalem had been overthrown, the temple destroyed, and the people felt completely cut off. Psalm 137 speaks of the despair of this time, "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for song, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"^{iv} The people are in such depths of despair that they cannot even sing. Brueggemann says second Isaiah makes it possible to sing, and when a people can boldly sing, even in the worst of situations, there is hope.^v Think of the rich tradition of African American spirituals. In the midst of the cruelty and oppression of slavery, the people developed a rich

treasury of song; they had the ability to imagine, to hope and trust that slavery would not always be their reality. The civil rights leader and theologian Ruby Sales, in her interview with Krista Tippett that I listened to this morning, spoke of her experience growing up in black fold religion, saying "by the time I was seven I could sing fifty songs without missing a line." Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speeches sang—the power of his language was the power of poetry and song that inspired people to believe and work for a new reality.

The prophet of Second Isaiah offers people a new song, and that new song inaugurates a new reality, as Brueggemann writes. He says, "Second Isaiah gives his people a remarkable gift. He gives them back their faith by means of rearticulating the old story. He gives them the...capacity to confront despair rather than be surrounded by it."^{vi} It is a new song that reminds them of their history, that they are a covenant people, and just as God heard the cries of ancient Israel in Egypt, and overcame Phaorah and brought them out of slavery, so God hears their cries now and will create a new thing and bring them home through the wilderness. In our passage today, second Isaiah speaks not just to the nation of Israel in exile, but to the coastlands, the people from far away—he is audacious enough to proclaim that this new song is not just for Israel, but for all nations.

We learn a lot about what it means to be a prophet, and a prophetic people, in this passage. Isaiah says that he was called by God from before he was born. God made his mouth like a sharp sword, made him like a polished arrow, and told him he was the Lord's servant, in whom God will be glorified. Though second Isaiah is a prophet of hope—when you are proclaiming hope to people who are oppressed, who have been captured and taken into exile, the flip side of that is a message of challenge and change to those who are in power. Isaiah's words are a sharp sword and a polished arrow—hope for those who despair but judgement for those who are the source of that despair. And then, in verse 4, we see that this prophet is human, just like everyone else, wondering if all his work means anything. The prophet laments, "I labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God." The prophet doesn't see immediate results, and momentarily gives in to despair. But as quickly as he sank into despair, he rises out of it, remembering he is doing God's work. Even if he doesn't see it come to its fruition, his cause is with God and his reward is with God.

This is such an important message for us. As Christ's body on earth, the church, too, has a prophetic ministry—it is part of who we are. Just as Isaiah was born to be a prophet, it was his identity, the church is also called to be prophetic, it is part of our identity. We may never see the fulfillment of God's reign on earth in our lifetime—I don't imagine we will see the end of racism, injustice, poverty, discrimination and oppression—but we are still called to be true to God's righteousness, to Jesus' call to love our neighbors as ourselves, and be his agents of healing and reconciliation. Remember the prescient ending of what would be Martin Luther King's last speech, the day before he was assassinated:

"Well, I don't know what will happen now...But it doesn't matter...Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."^{vii}

King knew his life was at risk, and he seemed to know that he didn't have long. He knew he wouldn't see the day his dream would be realized, but he knew that it was ultimately God's dream, and one day it would be reality. Isaiah did not see the fulfillment of God's promises, Martin Luther King didn't, and we are unlikely too, either, at least not in this lifetime. But we are still called to trust in them, proclaim them and live into them.

We are called to a prophetic ministry simply because we are the church. We are called to proclaim God's vision for this world and to live as members of God's kingdom. Are we being true to that ministry? At times, it means speaking words that are like a sharp sword or a polished arrow. It means

examining our own lives and lifestyles and the ways they may contribute to keeping others from living a full, free life. Martin Luther King's *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* was written to the white church, to white church leaders who questioned the nonviolent direct-action of the civil rights movement. In it, he expresses his disappointment with the white church and its leadership. When the movement first started, he thought the white religious leaders of the south would be strong allies. But for the most part, that was not the case. He writes, "In the midst of a might struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, 'Those are social issues which the gospel has nothing to do with,' and have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between bodies and souls, the sacred and the secular." He goes on, "The contemporary church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the averages community is consoled by the church's often vocal sanction of things as they are...I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour."^{viii}

If you have not read it, or read it recently, I encourage you to mark this Martin Luther King, Jr. Day by reading this letter. Its message to the church is as timely now as it was nearly 60 years ago. We are called to a prophetic ministry that speaks of hope to those who despair, that sings a new song, that lives into God's vision of a world at peace, a world that chooses to follow the Lamb of God over the worldly ways of wealth and power. As King says, "I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour."

Let us pray: Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

ⁱ Walter Bruggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001). See chapters 1 – 3 for his development of this aspect of the critical, dismantling aspect of prophetic ministry

ⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," 1963. <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", August 1963.

^{iv} Psalm 137:1-4, NRSV.

^v Brueggemann, p. 71.

^{vi} Brueggemann, pp. 74-77.

^{vii} Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," April 3, 1968. <https://www.afscme.org/union/history/mlk/ive-been-to-the-mountaintop-by-dr-martin-luther-king-jr>

^{viii} *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*