

Sermon – Holy Spirit

October 2, 2016

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

*Purpose: Let people know they are prophets and what they are called to do.*

Prophets are strange figures to most modern people. If we think about them at all, it may be like the characters in New Yorker cartoons—you know, the ragged figure with a beard holding a sign that states, “The end is near!” Or we might think of a TV preacher who scares people and raises money by informing his audience that he knows when the end of the world will take place. Some may think of powerful historical figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. And someone like King *is* a modern version of the biblical prophet. Yet the historically great are hard for most of us to relate to-- it is easy to keep them up on a pedestal, safely away from our own lives.

So we might ask, “What is a prophet? What made a prophet 3,000 years ago and what makes a prophet today? Do they even exist anymore in our modern world?” I believe they do, because I have seen them. On my better days, I am one. And this part may surprise you-- you are prophets, too. Because as believers in Jesus, we follow the ultimate prophet, the One who has called his followers to be a prophetic community, following him as we work to bring God’s kingdom to earth.

So to be clear, being a prophet does not mean we can predict the future. We do not need to dress in ragged clothes, grow a shabby beard, and carry a sign proclaiming the end of the world. But we are called to do what the prophets of Israel and Judah did and what our Lord did during his earthly life and ministry. That includes four main things—pay attention; ask questions, especially hard questions; pray; and then speak up and act with courage so we can participate more fully in what God is doing in the world to bring God’s kingdom and justice.

We heard from the prophet Habakkuk in today’s readings. Scholars believe he lived and did his work as a prophet around 600 BCE, in the years before the Babylonians would conquer Judah and send its leaders into exile. Habakkuk is a model for prophetic ministry—he paid attention to the injustice in the world around him and then he asked hard questions, even of God—such as why God allowed injustice. Habakkuk also prayed beautiful prayers, especially one in chapter three that we did not read today. And he spoke out and took action against the corrupt and powerful of his day.

You see Habakkuk was stuck in an unjust society. The king of his day, Jehoiakim, was corrupt. He abused his power in order to try to maintain it. He took advantage of people, especially the poor. God informed the prophet that judgment is coming—that the corrupt leadership of his country would be defeated and replaced. But Habakkuk understood that this divine judgment would come with a high price of suffering and violence. So he asked questions of God—why was this the way? Could there not be a better way?

The prophet does not get a fully satisfactory answer from God. There is a mystery to life. Even if you are a prophet, you do not have all the answers. But the answer Habakkuk did get is powerful. It was repeated by St. Paul in his letter to the Romans and later used by Luther to launch the Reformation.

Here it is: “The righteous live by their faith,” or as we may know it from the King James Version, “The just shall live by faith.”

No matter what is happening in the world around us, prophets and the prophetic community—including all of us here today—are called to live justly through our faith. That means not giving up on justice and faith even when things get hard or confusing. Instead we are to do all that we can even when we do not understand the world as it is.

Just faith like this is hard, especially if we pay attention to life. Questions inevitably come up. Archibald MacLeish wrote about this in his adaptation of the biblical book of Job titled, *J.B.* He wrote:

“If God is God He is not good,

If God is good He is not God.”

The technical, theological term for this issue is “theodicy.” How do we believe an all-powerful God is good when there is evil and suffering in the world? Prophets raise this question because they are paying attention. Prophets see the pain of individuals, families, communities; the pain of the entire human race and all of creation. Prophets are not supposed to look away or be superficial in our response. We are to lean in closer and be with those who suffer, to support them, and to lend our voice to theirs as they cry out against injustice.

In our world today, there is a great need for prophets—people to pay attention, ask hard questions, pray, and then speak up and act. Some of us heard from one of those prophets this past Thursday evening at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Atlanta. Bryan Stevenson, an attorney and author of the book, *Just Mercy*, spoke about the need for comprehensive criminal justice reform in our nation. There are compelling issues in our system that prophets pay attention to-- issues like disparate sentencing based on race; long term solitary confinement, especially of juveniles; and the use of capital punishment. I recommend that all of us read Bryan’s book to learn more about the facts and the stories we need to understand.

Some of us here know about the criminal justice system first hand; others through family members; still others from what we learn through the media or books. Some of us do not know much about the system at all. As a prophetic community, we are called to pay attention, ask questions, pray, and then speak up and act.

We saw what that looks like with the prophetic witness of Cathy Zappa and others at the time of the execution of Kelly Gissendaner a little over a year ago. Kelly was guilty and admitted that what she did was horrible. But beyond the merits of Kelly’s individual case (which were compelling for many), a prophetic community must ask, “Is executing people just? Is it being done fairly regardless of race or economic resources or quality of legal counsel?” And most importantly for us, “Is it helping to bring God’s kingdom to earth?”

Often the issues that prophets pay attention to are complex. For example, do we as a powerful nation intervene militarily in some foreign land where people are being killed due to war, some place like South Sudan or Syria? Or will our actions make things worse and simply add more violence? As a prophetic community, we may not know the answer. But we can pay attention and ask questions and

pray and speak up about the suffering of God's people and be sure they are not forgotten. When the way forward is not clear, we can trust God and pray for our leaders to make wise and just decisions.

Here is what we *can* do-- live our lives in a way that proclaims what we know about God. That despite the questions we have about the world as it is, we believe God is love. We believe God wants the best for all people, whether they are the people we love or the people we consider enemies or criminals. We can live differently in those areas that we *can* control— living simply and generously on this earth; treating all people with respect; and holding the powerful accountable for how they treat the powerless. As Bryan Stevenson said Thursday, we need to get closer to the poor and distressed and learn what people are dealing with that we do not see. And as Bryan also said, stay hopeful, because hopelessness is the enemy of justice.

If we are able to do that with God's help, that does not mean that everything will become okay. Suffering will still go on. Widows will grieve. Parents will worry. Politicians will frustrate us and even make us angry. Violence will be done to the innocent. Members of the military and police will be killed trying to protect us. And sometimes they will do wrong and innocent people will die. That is our world. But because we trust in a God who saves, we do not lose hope.

In the part of Habakkuk we did not read today, the prophet offers us a beautiful prayer of faith, a prayer to remember even when we face hard times. Here is a part of it:

“Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines;  
though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food;  
though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.  
God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
and makes me tread upon the heights.”

That prayer reveals our hope as people of faith, as a community of prophets—that no matter what happens, we can trust that God will one day make things right for all people and for all time. Until that day, our work is to do all we can with God's help to hasten its coming. Amen.