

Third Sunday of Advent

YOU DON'T WANT TO BE A PROPHET (Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11)

By Eric Barreto

You don't want God to ask you to be a prophet. You really don't.

When God calls you to some holy task, you might expect a contemplative path, a quiet life of service and love of neighbor. You might expect a comfortable life of piety and hopefulness, grace and caring.

But true prophets know better.

Prophets tend not to have such idyllic hopes for God's call. Prophets know too well that the call of God to speak hard truths is paved with difficulty. The prophet's road is lonely not because she escapes the hubbub of everyday life in order to retreat and draw near to God. No, the prophet's road is lonely because she is called to the most troubled corners of the world, places which existence we would rather deny or ignore. The prophet's road is lonely because she must speak boldly to an upside-down world that doesn't realize it is upside-down. The prophet sees the world as it really is while we see the prophet and marvel that she is walking on the ceiling.

In our readings for this week, we encounter two prophets who speak bold words to a world predisposed to ignore them. We encounter two prophets who speak a word of deliverance to the downtrodden and judgment upon the powerful. We encounter two prophets engaged with the most pressing matters of all. We encounter two prophets that we still refuse to heed.

Isaiah and Mary: A Prophetic Duet

Isaiah 61 begins by declaring the advent of the spirit upon the life and work of the prophet. God has anointed the prophet, sealed him with a holy task and call. But his holy task and call is not to do the stuff we usually call "spiritual." The prophet is bringing a word of hope for some but condemnation to others. By declaring free those who are enslaved, the prophet points out those responsible for the enslaving of God's children. By comforting those who mourn, the prophet names the sources of their grief.

So also when Mary's becomes a prophetic singer at the announcement of Jesus' arrival in Luke 1:46-55, she leads a chorus of prophetic voices. She is a pregnant teenager in an insignificant corner of a mighty empire and yet her voice resounds with hope and truth. The world, she says, is about to be turned upside down and right side up. As New Testament scholar Beverly Roberts Gaventa has argued, Mary here becomes the first disciple of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. She is the first to recognize who he is and name the transformation his life will bring. Mary is a prophet whose voice reverberates throughout the generations.

Advent—these weeks leading to Christmas—is a time of prophets and prophecy. As we wait during these ever shorter days for the birth of Jesus, prophets and their prophecy ring in our ears. Resonant promises speak of justice and liberation and deliverance. We yearn to believe these words because they ring so true even as we look around us and see a world tearing itself apart.

Prophecy (Re)defined

Prophecy, we must remember, is not a synonym for prediction. Prophets are not prognosticators guessing at what the future holds. Prophets look at the world as it is and imagine its transformation through a God-infused imagination. What if violence and death were not the order of the day? What if compassion, not selfishness, reigned in our midst? What if we could all see ourselves and our neighbors as God sees us?

And so the prophet does not guess what's next. The prophet does not set her eyes to the future but plants herself in the present, in all its blessedness and mire, and says God is present here. She declares a new world and in this bold, courageous declaration God acts. In the very act of speaking a God-inspired word of consolation and hope, the prophecy comes to life in our midst as we lift our hands to serve our neighbor and move our feet to go to the most desolate places and discover there that God and God's servants are very much alive, very much present. We find that those desolate places are not so desolate after all.

So Where Do We Find Prophets Today? What Are They Saying to Us?

We find prophets today in all kinds of places. We just need to know how and where to look.

We find prophets imprisoned for feeding the homeless. We rally to their side by sharing their story on Facebook even while we would wish for more ways to cover up the problem of homelessness and our complicity in its sources. We find prophets in the passionate protests at Ferguson even while our eyes are drawn by the media and our worst instincts to focus on the violent few who express a boiling and legitimate rage. We find prophets in the cry #ICantBreathe, in the dire yearning for a world where violence and death don't have the final say, even as we deny the chains of racism and prejudice that weigh heavily on all our shoulders. We find prophets in young people lying down on the ground to symbolize the deaths of their neighbors even as too many of us doubt the power of protest and symbolism.

No one really wants to be a prophet. Their road is hard, and no one really listens to them. Their declamations make us profoundly uncomfortable. True prophets are dismissed as lunatics even as they point out the insanity of a broken world.

No one really wants to be a prophet, but we need them more than ever when Michael Brown and Eric Garner and Tamir Rice and countless others whose names we don't know pay the ultimate price for an upside-down world.

Study Questions

1. What are the greatest blessings in your life? Do you ever confuse blessing and privilege?
2. Have you ever felt called to say or do something prophetic? How did you respond?
3. Where do you find prophets today? What are they telling us?

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