

Trinity United Methodist Church, Iron Mountain, Michigan

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 26, 2018

Pastor Geri Hamlen

‘Where Have All the Prophets Gone?’

This summer we are looking at the variety of ways in which God communicates with people—as recorded for us in the Bible. So many different ways. Burning bushes. Prayers. Strangers from afar. Dreams....Last week we considered how designated church leaders...Ministers, priests, Bishops have a calling to reveal not only God’s love and grace but also God’s desire for justice and God’s power in the face of evil.

This week, let’s look at the way Prophets reveal God’s message to God’s people. For those of us Reading Through the Bible in A Year...we have been introduced to the earliest prophets: Moses, Deborah—of the judges, Samuel—the king maker, Elijah who was hated by Queen Jezebel. Each of these and many more had a part to play in the history of Israel and the writers of the earliest books of the Bible.

Today, we will read from Isaiah...the first prophet who wrote his own story and messages from God. Isaiah is probably the most quoted of all the prophets...in Christianity, Judaism, and the popular culture. He has a very specific experience of God calling him to prophetic work. Let’s hear in the words of Isaiah what that was like.

First Testament Reading

Isaiah 6: 1 – 8

Bruce: In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne,
high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.

Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings:

with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet,
and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

Pastor Geri: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

Bruce: The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called,
and the house filled with smoke.

And I said:

“Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips,
and I live among a people of unclean lips;

yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me,

holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar
with a pair of tongs.

The seraph touched my mouth with it and said:

Pastor Geri: “Now that this has touched your lips,
your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”

Bruce: Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,
“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Liturgist: The word of God from long ago to the people of God today.

Thanks be to God.

We hear Isaiah's experience of seeing God on the throne.

We hear Isaiah doubting his worthiness to serve God...

We hear him acknowledging God's power in taking away his guilt and blotting out his sin.

We hear Isaiah saying...Here I am, Lord. Send me...

All of this is estimated to have happened in the second half of the 8th century before Jesus was born. Some 2,800 years ago.

Now, let's hear what that sounds like today as we sing the song written in 1981 using the words from this Scripture reading.

***Morning Hymn**

Here I Am, Lord

3 verses

#593

God's use of Prophets is easy to find in the First Testament, in the Hebrew Scriptures because of the more than a few books that are named after the prophets. Prophets are harder to find in the Writings after the birth of Jesus but they are there. Remember Anna, the prophet who fasted and prayed in the Jerusalem temple night and day and was there when Joseph and Mary brought the new born baby Jesus for presentation to the Lord. When Anna saw the baby she praised God and spoke about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. Jesus, himself, talks about John the Baptist as a prophet...in fact, more than a prophet. Let's hear what Jesus said about John after finding out that his blood relative was being held in prison by Herod, the ruler at that time.

Second Testament Reading

Matthew 11: 7 – 11

Bruce: As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?

A reed shaken by the wind?

What then did you go out to see?

Someone dressed in soft robes?

Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.

What then did you go out to see?

A prophet?

Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

This is the one about whom it is written,

Pastor Geri: 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

Bruce: Truly I tell you, among those born of women

no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist;

yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

The word of God from long ago to the people of God today.

Thanks be to God.

The Message

'Where Have All the Prophets Gone?'

Pastor Geri Hamlen

Two questions kept my brain really busy when I first started studying the Bible seriously...One which isn't really relevant for today's worship...

1. Why are there so many bad Kings in the Bible? What is that all about? And...more relevant to today's worship...

The second question is still lingering in my mind as I think about how God speaks to us through the prophets...

2. Where have all the Prophets gone? Why doesn't God send us prophets any more to tell us what to do next?

The prophets we read about in the Bible...both Old and New Testament...are so important to the telling of God's story. I figure when God felt like burning bushes and dreams weren't getting the job done...God sent messages for particular people, like Isaiah to pass along. Messages, good news to pass along to the people, like John the Baptist did. To pass along to the kings...so many prophets spoke up to those bad kings telling them where they were going wrong and what the future just might hold for them if they continued going in the wrong direction.

Now I grant you that sometimes the prophets were a little kookie.

Isaiah walked around naked and bare-foot for 3 years to warn the king against making a treaty with Egypt and Ethiopia.

Jeremiah lay on his side for 2 years, hoping to convince the people of Israel to be more faithful.

Some of the prophets were known for ecstatic speaking in tongues and whirling around like dervishes.

Some of the prophets are down-right scary with their vision of God's fury and their pictures of an apocalyptic future. The movies and comedians kind of sort of make us laugh, but not too hard, at the stereotype of a bearded man hollering...The end is near. Repent!

But other prophets in the Bible were highly respected...working for the kings...They functioned within the halls of government and served as trusted advisers. Some kings allowed, and even sought out the prophets to be messengers of God to them about treaties and wars and the treatment of the people. Prophets even served in revealing false prophets and discrediting the gods with a small 'g' who were still being worshipped on the high places and the low-down places, among those who God, with a big 'G,' had liberated from Egypt.

Of course, being a prophet was a dangerous occupation when the king didn't like what you were saying. Because the prophets talk consequences...What's that movie... 'There will be Blood.' I haven't seen it in a long time but I remember thinking that the prophets would have called it 'There will be Consequences and you will NOT be happy.' Kings don't like to hear that sort of thing so....Jeremiah spent a long time in captivity in a deep well. And John the Baptist was beheaded.

We know that God used prophets throughout the Biblical writings...to reveal God's love and mercy. To proclaim God's judgment and to advocate for justice and faithfulness. So when did Prophets disappear from the landscape like so many dinosaurs? Where did all the prophets go?

It's a question that keeps coming up in my mind because it seems that now...just like back in the day and down through history...we really need all the help we can get to figure out what God wants done. We are living in a time of rapid technological change...the likes of which has never been seen before within the time-line of human history. And so much of this ever-changing technology feeds us information, ideas, suggestions, and pictures of what the future holds if we...keep doing what we're doing or we if we don't start doing whatever that particular piece of information demands of us. Wouldn't it be great if a prophet from God came along and told us what to do and what to believe out of this mish-mash of information?

But no....no more prophets now-a-days.

So let me tell you what I have put together on this question.

When I asked my Old Testament professor about this, he had some thoughts. He said that this Book, this Bible, this inspired word of God is considered complete unto itself. God's revelation through this book is sufficient for all times, all places and all people. If we apply ourselves to read, to study, to discuss, to pray and to discern for our time---God's bigger project, as I call it. He said that we don't need any more prophets because the ones in the Bible are already teaching us what we need to know. The question is...are we being good students and learning our lessons and applying what we learn? Do we know what Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Amos and read the Table of Contents...are saying and why?

In my naiveté, this was probably one of my first classes in Seminary, I said: But why doesn't God have mercy on us and send someone to talk in modern day language so we can figure out what's going on her and now? The professor said...You don't seem to understand, young lady. Even though I wasn't all that young at the time but I was younger than him...The Canon is Closed! And Bible is fine just the way it is. And whatever the prophets had to teach then, is useful and will serve God's purposes now. The word of God from long ago is for the people of God today. And if we can't figure it out today, then keep reading and studying and talking and more will be revealed. He almost said: So there!

So, what can we do with that? We'll never know what the Isaiah might have to say about Facebook and Twitter but...surely, Reading Through the Bible in A Year will make something obvious for us. I hope. We haven't gotten to the prophets yet. Coming soon....

Well, later on in my education, I took my first New Testament class. And wouldn't you know...The subject of the prophets came up and I again got to ask my question...Where have all the Prophets gone? This professor had a different take on it. Instead of playing what I call the Closed Canon card...she reminded us that the Prophets pointed the way to the Messiah...to Jesus. Then she gave us a chance to discuss at some length the many different times and ways in which the New Testament writers over and over again affirm that Jesus is the fulfillment of so many words of so many prophets. God sent the message through the prophets...see the bulletin cover... **Amos 3:7** Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants, the prophets.

The prophets tell us that there is a messenger and a message greater than the prophets. That message **is** the messenger: Jesus Christ. God came to earth as Jesus to show us as individuals,
to show us as the church,
to show the kings in high places
and to show the powers in low places that there is hope.
There is light.
There is victory over death and damnation.

My New Testament professor challenged us: Why would we need more prophets today when Jesus has already lived and died and been resurrected by the power of God who so loved the world...as to live in the world with us and for us. Not to condemn and judge but to save and set us free and to show us steadfast love that endures forever.
We don't need more prophets. We just need to pay more attention to Jesus!
How about that? Maybe we can indeed, live without any more prophets. Do you think?

The Canon may be closed but we have a chance to live out the words of the prophets and the Message of Jesus. Our actions, our words, our love for God and each other just might be the only Bible that some people ever get to read.
So without present day prophets....all we need is
A little bit of discipline.
A little bit of humble attention to the Scriptures.
A little bit of willingness to talk to other people who are also reading the Bible and asking questions.
And a whole lot of trust...Trusting that we can look behind us at the message of the prophets as messengers of God, revealed in the Bible and see
God's past faithfulness to an unfaithful people and
God's current lessons of hope and love and even,
trusting that we can see and anticipate God's future through the Messiah, the Holy One.

The prophets tell us to live as those who trust in the Lord so that when we look forward, the words of the past prophets will ring in our ears.
And the Holy Message and Messenger Jesus will glow brightly on the path leading to God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.
No matter what the world around us is doing or going through.

Jesus is our shepherd who leads us through the past and present into the future.
Because our God is just that powerful and amazing and wonderful.
And that's what the prophets were talking about. All we have to do is listen. Amen.