

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

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Date: January 29, 2023. Year A. Reconciling in Christ Sunday

Text: Micah 6:1-8

Title: The Voice of the Prophet and the Call of God

Focus: The role of the prophet is to redirect us and call us closer to God. The message of the prophet is often hard to hear and the prophet is often rejected. Sometimes, only much later do people recognize the prophet was speaking the Word of God. How long does it take before we recognize someone's courage and prophetic voice? The sermon will look at the response to various calls for social justice, including the full inclusion of LGBTQ folks in the life of the Church, and how they reflect the Word and call of God.

First Reading: Micah 6:1-8

¹Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ²Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. ³"O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. ⁵O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD."

⁶"With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" ⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

"What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?"

Do you remember a while back when I opened a sermon by asking "What do you want to be when you grow up?" It was the 4th Sunday of Advent, December 18.

Here's something that **no one** said, no matter what their age: A prophet. No one dreams of that job.

The Role of a Prophet

What's the role of a prophet?

The role is rooted in those we know as prophets from the Hebrew Scriptures--the Old Testament. A prophet is a messenger. Their role or job is to deliver a message from God that is intended to draw people back to God.

A prophet may say to people: "Here's what God says" or "Here's what God intends for you." And then metaphorically hold up a mirror and say, "Here's what I see in your attitudes and behaviors and how you relate to one another; here's how you're living." And then let people observe the contrast between what God intends and how they are living.

In everyday speech, we typically don't go around calling people prophets. It's not a term used in popular culture. And yet the function or the role of a prophet is still needed because, broken and sinful people that we are, both inside and beyond the Church, we still foul up and need to be reminded of God's call to us to live in a more faithful way.

We may not label someone a "prophet," but there are those who function in this way. We may talk about having a "prophetic voice," which means to speak in such a way as to intend to draw people back to God, as a prophet does.

Who Wants to Be a Prophet?

Why don't people say they want to be a prophet when they grow up or why doesn't anyone want that job? Maybe the answer is so obvious that it's weird to even ask the question. Having the job of a prophet would be like being the first person answering the Complaint Desk Hotline.

People don't want that job because other people are going to be cranky in response to you. People don't want the job because the personal costs are too great. If a prophet's job or role is to deliver a message, too often they themselves get blamed for the message. If you're delivering a message that is intending to hold people accountable, well, guess what, most people don't like that.

So no one self-nominates for this job. You don't eagerly sign up for it. If you are assuming the role of a prophet, it is because you are drawn into it or called into it. You are compelled to do it because God is calling you to this or you must do it for justice's sake.

This reluctance to be a prophet or to assume that role is shown by Biblical prophets: **Amos is one example:** "Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees" (Amos 7:14).

- He's saying he's just a regular guy, a herdsman. He's no full-time prophet; he's just been drafted into this by God. His comment implies that, if he had his choice, he'd be back as a herdsman rather than taking on this challenge.
- **There's Jonah:** remember, he was the one whom God called to go to Ninevah. To get to Ninevah, Jonah would have to travel north and east by land. Instead, he got in a boat and went in the opposite direction—he went west, intending to get as far away from this as he could.

This reluctance isn't just from Biblical prophets, but contemporary ones.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was called as the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama May 2 of 1955 when he was just 26 years old. He was a graduate of Morehouse College, then Crozer Theological Seminary, then earned a doctorate from Boston University.¹

It was in December of 1955—he was still just 26 years old—when he was elected to be the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association. Rosa Parks had been arrested for refusing to give up her seat and leaders gathered to determine how they would respond to the inhumane, unjust treatment that “Negroes” experienced when riding the city buses.

The original plan was to have one day boycott of the buses. The Montgomery Bus Boycott eventually stretched for over a year and ended with the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that segregation on public buses is unconstitutional. Martin Luther King was ready to be pastor of Dexter Avenue Church, but he wasn't looking to promote himself for national role. And yet he was ready when circumstances presented themselves (and maybe God was in the midst of that).

Martin Luther King, Jr. didn't seek this particular leadership role, but it propelled him as a community leader and provided a blueprint for future nonviolent protest actions designed to carry that prophetic voice to draw people back to the justice which God intends.

How Prophets are Often Received

As we said earlier, if people don't like the message, they blame the one delivering that message.

¹ Biographical information summarized from King Institute Papers at Stanford University.
<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/introduction>

- They're often blamed, their motivation or actions are mischaracterized, they're labeled as an extremist, called names or vilified, "blackballed" or shut out from opportunities

Martin Luther King:

- Rocks thrown through his living room window
- Bombs were set off in churches where he was or his home
- Stabbed with a letter opener to his chest, which nearly punctured his aorta.
- He was investigated by the FBI and there were attempts to discredit him
- Threatening letters and verbal threats, ugly names, labeled a Communist (attempt to discredit him and question his love for America)
- Beaten and thrown in jail
- Scolded by white establishment, including clergy men (See *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*)
- Of course, the final attack against him was his assassination, which was in Memphis in April, 1968.
- **US Sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos in 1968 Olympics, along with Australian Peter Norman**

The 1968 Olympics took place in Mexico City. Leading up to the games, a number of athletes wrestled with the decision about taking part because of protracted racism and exploitation.² Two who chose to compete, though they had the same concerns about racial injustice, were US track and field sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos. They took first and third in the 200-meter final. As they took the podium to receive their medals,

- They were each wearing a button for **the OPHR, the Olympic Project for Human Rights**, a protest against South Africa and Apartheid (among 2 other demands) (See Feinstein, pp. 26-27).
- They took off their running shoes and wore black socks as a symbol of the poverty that so many Black people lived with in the United States.
- The silver medalist, Australian Peter Norman, asked about the meaning of the buttons. He then asked if he could wear one and he did. (Feinstein, p. 27)
- Smith and Carlos bowed their heads and raised a fist on the medal stand.

John Carlos and Tommie Smith were kicked out of the Olympic movement

² UCLA basketball star Lew Alcindor, for instance, who in Los Angeles in 1967 said: Standing in front of about 200 people at the Second Baptist Church, Alcindor said, "Everybody knows me. I'm the big basketball star, the weekend hero, everybody's All-American." But on the streets of Harlem, he said, he was just another black man who could easily become the victim of police brutality.
<https://andscape.com/features/lew-alcindor-kareem-abdul-jabbar-ucla-boycot-1968-olympics/>

- They were banned from the Olympic movement: Ordered to fly home from Mexico City and ordered to return their medals (they did not return the medals)³
- John Carlos: “We were called every name in the book. We were thrown out of the Olympic movement. And you know what? There are still plenty of people out there who think we got what we deserved—just like there are people out there who think that kid [Colin] Kaepernick got what he deserved. He sacrificed his career doing what he thought was right.” (Feinstein, p. 28, from an interview conducted in 2021 soon after the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol)
- Colin Kaepernick was blackballed. He was a quarterback who took the 49ers to within a yard of winning a Super Bowl, but wasn’t offered a contract by another team.

Of course, people have different views and different explanations, but I think they were kicked out because for many people it was too hard to hear the truth of the prophetic message of justice that they delivered.

What’s the Prophetic Message of Micah?

“Hear” is the first word, the Hebrew *shema*. “Hear what the Lord says”

- This reflects the role of the prophet as we’ve described—it is to share the message from God (& point out to the people their behavior)
- vv. 1b-5 are spoken as God’s words. God desires that the people be in close relationship with God (Remember, I am the one who brought you out of slavery in Egypt—I continue to want freedom and fullness of life for you) (v. 4).
 - But you seem to be tired of me (v. 3b)
 - You seem to think I have harmed you in some way (v. 3a)
 - Speak up, tell me what’s really bugging you, “Plead your case” (v. 1).
- Verses 6-7 are like the people’s response to God; they create a dialogue.
 - What do you want, God? Burnt offerings? Gifts of immense value? My firstborn?
 - There’s a tone of exasperation.
- Verse 8: God’s reply through the prophet/messenger Micah
 - Don’t pretend like you don’t know.
 - Don’t make grandiose offers of overwhelming generosity with the underhanded sarcastic suggestion that you’re either doing too much or God’s asking too much and that it’s unreasonable.
 - You already know that God expects 3 related things
 - **Do justice**

³ John Feinstein, *Raise a Fist, Take a Knee: Race and the Illusion of Progress in Modern Sports* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2021), p. 28

- **Live kindness/mercy/Hebrew *hesed* (actions which demonstrate steadfast love)**
- **Walking humbly in relationship with God** (not blaming, not becoming distant, not aggrandizing)

This is the message of the prophet, seeking to draw the people back to God. How shall we determine if something is from God? How will we assess it? Micah would say

- Is it just? Is it fair?
 - How are people without wealth or power being treated? How about those who are on the outside in some way? How are conditions for them?
- Does it demonstrate Hebrew *hesed*? Which in English is mercy, kindness, steadfast love, a love that never gives up.
- Through these actions (whatever you're doing), are people drawn into closer relationship with each other and with God?
- Do they demonstrate humility and reliance on God?
- These are the factors as expressed by Micah.

A Prophetic Call in the ELCA (Mirroring Other Christian Denominations as well)

There was a prophetic call for justice that is a part of the ELCA's recent history. In August of 2009, leaders/voting members from across the 65 synods (geographic regions) of the ELCA, the parent denomination of Good Shepherd, gathered in Minneapolis, MN for the Churchwide Assembly. Larry Struve from Good Shepherd was one of the voting members.

One of the decisions which they would face was acting on a proposed **Social Statement** of the denomination called "**Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust.**" This project was commissioned 8 years earlier, so people had been working on it and discussing it for a long time.

In the discernment process, voting members were to collectively discuss, debate, wrestle with, pray over and determine:

- Does this represent the Word of God for us? –The call of God for the way we will relate to one another in our congregations and a lens through which we can view the world and our interactions with others beyond the Church?
- What are the consequences of a particular action we will take?
- What is compelling for us and how do we hear God speaking to us, that might compel us to act for the sake of justice, even if we see negative consequences?

- Doesn't that stand in the footsteps of Martin Luther, who said when he was convinced God was calling him to bold action, but which came at great personal cost, "Here I stand, I can do no other."

As a *social statement* of the denomination, that status carries particular weight for the Presiding Bishop as national leader and for pastors and congregations across the country. Recognizing that heightened authority were the report to be approved as a *Social Statement*, the approval threshold for a social statement must be higher. It's not a simple majority of 50% plus one, but a 2/3 super majority.

When the vote was tallied, it narrowly passed that 2/3 threshold: with a vote of 676 (66.67 percent) to 338 (33.33 percent) on August 19. Good Shepherd member Larry Struve was one of those who cast a vote that day. He was a Sierra Pacific Synod voting member. What that vote tally means is that if even one person who voted in the majority switched their vote, the action would not have passed. Larry has his own story to tell about his discernment process and a conversation he had with a woman whose voice was like the voice of a prophet to him.

The place of LGBTQ folks in the life of the Church is still tenuous. While the vote was cause for celebration for many, it also brought a sense of loss. While many hear the voice of God in this action, for others it is like the anger or discomfort or division that previous prophetic voices have experienced.

Will we look back and say, "What took us so long to recognize there's a place for everyone in this church? How long will it take? How long before we recognize the wideness of God's grace and mercy? God's boundaries or God's comfort level seem far wider than our own.

- The Australian Olympic Committee didn't recognize the courage and *hesed* of Peter Norman until after his death.
- It wasn't until 2005—37 years after the 1968 Olympics--that Smith and Carlos were recognized with a statue on the campus of San Jose State University were they had been students and athletes

Closing: Can We Bear the Message of Justice Ourselves?

It's often not until much later that the courage and wisdom of prophets is recognized (And, even then, there is likely to still be significant opposition.)

When Peter Norman died in 2006, Smith and Carlos flew to Australia to speak at his funeral and be pallbearers. **"He was my brother," said Carlos. "Peter Norman was a man who knew that right could never be wrong. Go and tell your children the story of Peter Norman."** (Feinstein, p. 33).

Tommie Smith: “The sad thing is I knew—*I knew*—that wearing the button [OPHR for Olympic Project for Human Rights, see p. 26] wasn’t going to be a good thing for Peter that night. The way the world was then, a white guy standing up for two Black guys, two *scary* Black guys, wasn’t going to turn out well. Right then and there, he did a lot to bridge the gap between Black and white. I wish there were more people in our country willing to stand up the same way Peter did” (p. 34)



“The three men who stood on the podium together in Mexico City remained friends until Norman died of a heart attack in 2006. He flew to San Jose in 2005 to be part of the unveiling of a statue on the San Jose State campus honoring Smith and Carlos. The statue depicts Smith and Carlos with fists raised on the first- and third-place platforms. **The second platform is empty. Norman asked that it be left empty so that visitors to the statue could stand on his empty spot to feel as if they had joined Smith and Carlos in their protest.**” (Feinstein, pp.

32-33.)

The prophetic message of justice is hard to bear. Can we people who stand up in this way? To have the courage of a prophet to stand up for justice? To “do justice, love kindness/*hesed*, and walk humbly with God. May we have the courage to do so.