

In light of Scripture, how is our ministry lived as prophetic calling? Celebrating the biblical groundedness of our calling*

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It is related in the Acts of the Apostles that an eccentric figure named Agabus was present at a prayer session of Jesus-followers in the Judean seaport city of Caesarea sometime in the early 60s of the first century. Also present was Paul. At some point in the session, Agabus got up, approached Paul, unwound Paul's belt, a wide and very long piece of cloth, sat down on the floor, and tied up his own hands and feet with it, saying all the while: "Thus saith the Holy Spirit: the one to whom this belongs will be tied up like this in Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentiles" (Acts 21:11) The prophecy, of course, proved to be true. Had Agabus tried anything like that at a Catholic liturgy today, he would be escorted out and sent for a psychological evaluation. This dissonance illustrates well the problem we face: how do we know true prophecy, and could we get around our cultural biases sufficiently to recognize it if it was staring us in the face?

Not that we encounter prophecy every day in the formal sense—but then again, in a less formal way, maybe we do. Some years ago, I was teaching a weekend workshop on biblical prophecy. I was explaining how, in an individualist culture like ours, one of the ways the prophetic Spirit works is through chance comments of other persons to us. At lunch that day, a participant sitting across from me inadvertently said something that resolved a dilemma I had been trying to solve that day, totally unbeknownst to the participants. At the end of the day, I mentioned to this person that he had unknowingly

* This presentation is dedicated to the memory of Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P. (1923-1994), who first taught me about the complementary roles of prophecy and priesthood in ancient Israel.

spoken prophecy to me at lunch. Without missing a beat, he said: “Oh, I know. I get it all the time from my three-year-old.”

In the first centuries of the Christian era, there was a belief among some, especially Jewish scholars, that prophecy had ceased in Israel with the destruction of the First Temple at the hands of the Babylonians in about 587 BCE. They pointed to such texts as 1 Macc 4:46 (Judas Maccabeus cleanses the Temple from foreign invasion and stores the stones of the altar until a prophet would come to tell them what to do with them); 14:41 (Simon Maccabeus should be high priest until a prophet arises), and Ps 74:9 (We no longer have a prophet who can tell us how long our exile will be).

It is doubtful, however, that people living in the Second Temple period really thought that this was a permanent condition. There is ample evidence to the contrary, especially if we take into account that those who developed apocalyptic theology in those years clearly thought of themselves as continuing the prophetic tradition. Earlier in twentieth century biblical scholarship, this idea of the cessation of prophecy was usually taken for granted, but in more recent years, it has been seriously questioned. Note that there are two questions here: does evidence for prophecy cease to arise in the Second Temple period, and did the people of the time think that it had ceased. The idea of the cessation of prophecy is more likely to have been a construct of both Jewish and Christian scholars of the early Christian era to fit their own purposes: rabbinic scholars could claim that their legal interpretations and the new Judaism that they were creating ushered in a new era where prophecy was a thing of the past. Christian scholars could claim that prophecy was reborn in the events surrounding Jesus.

On the contrary, the continuation of prophecy in ancient Israel well past the time of the “classical” prophets provides the backdrop for the belief of the earliest Christians that, far from being revived after a long dry spell, prophecy was continuing and finding its finest hour in Jesus, the greatest of the prophets—and of course, more than a prophet. The events of his death and resurrection were the triumph of the Holy Spirit of God, who had always been understood to be the force behind prophecy: see, for example, Rev 22:9 and 19, where John of Patmos understands himself in the company of the prophets and his work as prophecy. This is never so clear as in Luke and Acts. Look for the numbers of times in Luke’s Gospel that Zechariah, Mary, Elizabeth, and especially Jesus are “filled with the Holy Spirit” (e.g., Luke 4:1, 17-24; 9:19; 24:19). The Pentecost scene at the beginning of Acts is cast as a continuation and fulfillment of prophecy after the manner of the prophecy of Joel (Acts 2:17-18). Everything done in the early missionary movement according to Acts is done in response to the prophetic Spirit (e.g., Acts 13:1-3).

Two centuries later, the author of the martyrdom account of Perpetua, Felicitas, and their companions on March 7 of the year 203 in Carthage would once again evoke Joel 2:28 as quoted in Acts 2 to claim that the visions and revelations of the martyrs were new prophecies no less worthy than those of old for the upbuilding of the church.

Yet the prevailing model of Early Church History from the early twentieth century until recent years has been quite similar to the idea of those who believed in the cessation of prophecy in postexilic Israel: that after the early years in which the events of Jesus and the New Testament occurred, the church saw a decline of prophecy and the valuing of spiritual gifts in favor of increasing institutionalization. This idea nicely served

the purposes of those who saw either the time of Jesus, or the ministry of Paul as a golden age that quickly thereafter disintegrated within the later New Testament itself into the so-called “legalism” of the Pastoral Epistles and the Epistle of James with their insistence on order and good deeds to complement faith. This model arose in Germany among Lutheran scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and was still prevalent at major North American universities when I was doing my doctoral studies in the 1970s. Not surprisingly, it is usually called “frühkatholismus,” or “early catholicism,” with small “c,” meaning not Roman Catholicism, but that form of Jesus-following that developed into a highly organized network of churches led by bishops, the form of Christianity that, through a series of historical developments, became normative in both East and West, and in the West did become Roman Catholicism after the East-West break in 1054 and the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, thus the form of Christianity that we have inherited.

Contrary to the model of cessation of prophecy, either in postexilic Israel or the post-New Testament church, it can be argued that, though prophecy may take many different forms to meet changing circumstances, it has never ceased. I think this has everything to do with how we understand prophecy today. With this possibility in mind, let us first look at some distinctions between Old Testament and New Testament prophecy.

To borrow an idea from Jeremiah, the function of prophecy is “to tear down and to build up” (Jer 1:10). The classical Old Testament prophets seem to spend more time tearing down, while the New Testament prophets seem to do more building up. At least that is a popular image. But is eighth-century BCE Amos with his excoriating of elite life

in Samaria to have the last word over postexilic Second Isaiah with his message of comfort? Or can we not say that each responded to the need of the time? At the time of the Israelite monarchy, the two social forces of prophecy and priesthood provided some kind of balance of tension vis-à-vis each other. Both prophet and priest lived at the boundary of the human and the divine, but they typically mediated between the two realms in different ways. The institution of the Temple priesthood provided social maintenance and stability; it regularized procedure for the divine-human encounter. Prophecy, on the other hand, pushed the limits of the boundaries rather than to maintain and reinforce them; it called into question established practices and assumptions in the name of covenant fidelity. With the collapse of Temple and nation, prophecy took on a more overtly encouraging stance (e.g., Second and Third Isaiah) and a more radical hope born of catastrophe and loss of identity and security (e.g., Ezekiel and Daniel).

In Jesus' day there was again a Temple and priesthood, dominated by the elite priestly families known as the Sadducees. They were the ones responsible for conducting a peaceful and orderly Temple practice in which Israel might encounter its God and its identity again, in that wonderful compound rebuilt by Herod the Great and still being worked on all through Jesus' life. Jesus did not belong to the Sadducees or any other priestly family either by birth or by theological inclination. It is therefore something of a theological *tour-de-force* that the Letter to the Hebrews casts him in a priestly role. So far, no attempt to place Jesus securely within the society of his day has won general approval, but we can certainly say that, at least as portrayed in the Gospels, he identified heavily with the legacy of the prophets, the challengers of the priesthood, and in fact was

often called a prophet, in all four Gospels (e.g., Matt 21:11; Mark 8:28; Luke 7:16; John 4:19; 9:17).

For the first few generations of Jesus' followers, those in Jerusalem are described as going regularly to the Temple to pray. (Luke 50:53; Acts 2:46). Once it became clear that the Jerusalem Temple could not serve their needs, there was no recognized group in the churches that served the social function of the priesthood, that is, maintaining stability and structure in worship and religious practice. All priesthoods in the ancient Mediterranean world involved rituals of sacrifice, and the Christians had no such ritual other than the sacrificial connotations of their common meal, the Eucharist. They had no religious institution whose practices needed to be questioned in the name of covenant fidelity. From the earliest years, the practice of the disciples of Jesus was community-centered, not temple-centered. Paul's admonition to the Romans to present themselves as living sacrifices given to God through his priestly service (Rom 12:1; 15:16) is metaphorical and is to be understood in this context. Of course, once the Second Jerusalem Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, neither did Israelites have a sacrificial worship center, and this led to the formation of what we now recognize as rabbinic Judaism, a continuation of Israelite faith and practice that was substantially new in the same centuries in which followers of Jesus were coming to formulate new ways of expressing their faith, including the ministry of priesthood.

Both Paul and Luke, however, two of our most eloquent voices of the first generations, insist that prophecy is very much alive. Paul says that prophecy has three effects: *oikodomē*, *paraklēsis*, and *paramuthia* (1 Cor 14:3). The meanings of the three terms are so similar that one could question whether Paul really meant to distinguish

them, or simply to use the rhetorical device, the “rule of three.” Yet each has a slightly different nuance.

Oikodomē is “building up,” or “being constructive.” Paul argues that prophecy effects this for others and for the whole church, in contrast to speaking in tongues which effects this building up only for the speaker. All should therefore come to the assembly with a hymn, revelation, teaching, tongue, or interpretation, all for the building up (*oikodomē*) of all (1 Cor 14:4-5, 17, 26).

The second word, *paraklēsis*, contains both the ideas of comfort and encouragement or stirring up. Simeon in the Temple was looking for the *paraklēsis* of Israel (Luke 2:25): the assurance that God is with us in suffering. Thus he was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. In 1 Tim 4:13-14, leadership designated by the laying on of hands is associated with the roles of biblical instruction, *paraklēsis*, and teaching. This is the word that John uses in nominal form, “paraclete,” for the Holy Spirit, so that there are prophetic tones there as well. In Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch after the crucial meeting in Jerusalem that has decided their future as missionaries to the Gentiles. They bring with them from Jerusalem, two prophets, Judas and Silas. When the congregation in Antioch hears the letter from Jerusalem, they rejoice in the *paraklēsis*, which is also effected when the two prophets encourage them. So *paraklēsis* gets people to accept the agreement with joy and to understand that this is the working of God in their midst.

With these two ideas together we have Jeremiah’s tearing down and building up. This is not tearing down in a destructive way, but with a sense of what needs to be gutted to start over. To borrow an expression from Garrison Keillor of *Prairie Home*

Companion, it “makes shy people get up and do what needs to be done.” The third term, *paramuthia*, is associated with consolation or comfort, the notion of holding things together in a loving way in difficult times. It does not occur again in the New Testament, but is used by Plato in the sense of encouragement and persuasion (*Republic* 450d; *Laws* 720a; *Phaedo* 70b) and by Plutarch, writing a little later than Paul, as relief or cure from envy (*Themistocles* 22). So you see that prophecy as Paul understands it is not all tearing down or building up. It is the instinct and the wisdom to know which of the two needs to be done at the moment.

It is also clear that for characters like Jeremiah, Hosea, and Luke, prophecy is not only word but also action. Jeremiah engaged in some really bizarre public acts, like burying his underwear and digging it up again. Hosea understood that God was asking him to take back his adulterous wife, something abhorrent to the culture of the time. And we have already seen the action of Agabus in a setting in which Paul is warned about what will happen to him in Jerusalem. As I noted at the beginning, we have an interpretive problem here. Societal expectations largely determine what is acceptable action and what is not. Since we live in a very permissive culture, we would perhaps think that Hosea taking back his loose-living wife had acted well. We would have less patience with Jeremiah or Agabus. Behavior outside what society expects as “normal” is frowned upon. Of course, what is considered “normal” is evolving all the time, but that is another story.

Over the years, I have developed my own informal list of characteristics of true prophecy, based on the biblical evidence and my observation of how prophecy functions today. The first characteristic is the *reluctance* of the prophet. Prophets don’t want to be

prophets. Recall Jeremiah, trying the excuse that he was too young (Jer1:6). Recall Isaiah saying that he lived in such bad company that he couldn't possibly do it (Isa 6:5). Recall Amos saying that he was just a tree doctor (Amos 7:14). Not me. Surely there is someone else who could do it better. Beware the too-eager prophet. If there is something in there for number one, something of prestige or power, beware. Beware the prophet who has too large a following or who enjoys it too much.

The second characteristic is that *there is a cost to pay*. That's why prophets don't want to be prophets. They know too much. They know what it will cost. Social conflict, disapproval, even ostracism. Real prophets are not popular people. They are too hard to get along with. Recall poor Jeremiah in the stocks at one point, deposited another time in a muddy cistern to keep him out of public consciousness (37:11-38:6). He says, "No more! I'm not going to do this anymore!" But he can't keep quiet; it then becomes a burning inside him that he must let out (Jer 20:7-18). Prophets are not perfect people. They have clay feet just like the rest of us. When the centers of power resist the prophetic message, they know how to discredit the prophet by exposing his or her weaknesses.

The third characteristic of true prophecy is *ambiguity*. How do you know it's true? Well, you don't. In Jeremiah's day, there were prophets giving competing messages, some of comfort, some of upheaval (Jeremiah was on the upheaval side). How did people know which message to accept? In this case, they found out in retrospect which was the true word. While some prophets preached that alliance with Egypt would save them from the Babylonian invasion, Jeremiah said it wouldn't do any good. Jeremiah turned out to be right, but they didn't know that for sure until it happened.

In the New Testament church, how did they know when a prophecy was to be accepted and acted upon? Only by discernment did they come to such a conclusion. The story at the beginning of Acts 13 is instructive. There were prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch, among them Saul and Barnabas. They were praying and fasting, perhaps in a service something like that described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14, where different members contribute prayers, hymns, and prophecies. During the session, the Holy Spirit said to them: “Set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work I have planned for them.” How did the Spirit speak, by a voice from heaven? Probably not. Probably by a prophet standing up in the assembly and giving a prophecy, much like what is described by Paul. But back in Antioch, they didn’t exactly know what to do with this, and so they fasted and prayed, and finally discerned that they should do as they were prompted, so they laid hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them off on a new mission to Cyprus and Cilicia. They took a risk. Only when the two returned and gave the report of their success did the Antioch community know that they had acted wisely.

In the history of my own congregation, the Society of the Sacred Heart, one of the first members, St. Rose Philippine Duchesne, became convinced that she had a missionary vocation from France to America. She joined the congregation in 1804, only four years after its foundation, and was aware of her missionary vocation two years later. That’s all well and good, said the foundress, St. Madeleine Sophie Barat, but we’re not a missionary order and we can’t afford it. It took Philippine twelve more years to convince her, and she finally did it by kneeling in the doorway and blocking the exit as the bishop of St. Louis was leaving the Paris convent during his appeal for missionaries. In exasperation, Madeleine Sophie gave her consent. Under the circumstances, she could

hardly have done anything else. Through the years that followed, many must have thought that it was a mistake, especially when the missionaries reported back to Paris their sometimes terrible circumstances in the New World. The result, though for some years it seemed to be a mistake, was a rich harvest of foundations in America.

Paul spoke to the Thessalonian church about the necessity of discerning prophecy: “Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophecies, but discern everything and hold on to what is good” (1 Thess 5:19-22). I find it interesting that he speaks of the prophetic Spirit as something that can be quenched, put out with as little effort as it takes to blow out a candle. Yet everything must be tested, tried, discerned, not jumped into in the excitement of the moment. Even still, mistakes will sometimes be made, in spite of our best discernments, and we will only know for sure at a later time whether the decision or the action was a good one or not.

A fourth characteristic of true prophecy is that it has *no limits of age, race, class, or gender*, because it is a gift of the Holy Spirit, given as she pleases. The classical prophets of Israel often directed their prophecies not only against Judah and Israel but also against their near neighbors like Moab, Edom, and Egypt, and their enemies like Babylon and Assyria. The prophets were quite aware of what was going on in neighboring countries, and addressed those events. In the early years of the church there was great resistance by some to extend the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles. The thinking was that this was a renewal movement for Israel. But through revelations like that to Paul, and prophetic discernment like that at the Jerusalem Council, they came to the awareness that this movement would be directed to all.

In spite of all the attention given in recent years to study of the historical Jesus, still it is difficult to know just how much he restricted his attention almost completely to Israel, as presented in the ministry years by Matthew, and how much Jesus himself showed an openness and even an eagerness to connect more readily with Gentiles, as depicted by Mark. I think the evidence must have been ambiguous. Later, when faced with the decision toward greater openness, they had mixed memories about “what would Jesus do.” Of course, demographics eventually settled that one, as more Gentiles joined the movement, but fewer Israelites. Paul was a major mover in that regard, claiming that he got his mission to the Gentiles from the risen Christ himself. Who could argue with that? Though Paul never claimed to be a prophet, only a speaker in tongues (1 Cor 14:18), nevertheless some of his words and actions proved to be prophetic for the future.

Prophecy was never limited to men. Four significant women prophets stand out in the Hebrew Scriptures. At the Red Sea event, Miriam the prophet, sister of Moses and Aaron, led the dancing women in their ecstatic song (Exod 15:20-21). During the time of the judges, in the struggles against the Canaanites, Deborah the prophet, wife of Lappidoth, was one of the judges, who sat under a certain palm tree while Israelites came to her for judgment, that is, to settle their disputes with one another. But Deborah is also involved with politics and the military. It is she who speaks in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel, to command Barak to organize an army to fight the forces of Sisera at Mt. Tabor. He demands that she, the authorized voice of God, go with him into battle, and she agrees (Judg 4:4-9). The outcome is defeat of the Canaanites but not glory for Barak, for Sisera is defeated by another woman, Jael, wife of Heber, with her handy tent peg (Judg

4:17-22). Later, Deborah and Barak together lead the victory song, the so-called Song of Deborah, usually considered to be the oldest written composition in the Bible (Judg 5).

At the time of King Josiah in the late seventh century BCE, a new scroll of the law was discovered in the Temple. They knew they needed to consult a prophet to learn the meaning of this new discovery. So they went to Huldah the prophet, wife of Shallum, keeper of the wardrobe, who was living in Jerusalem. She speaks a long prophetic oracle that is not good news, except to young Josiah, who will be spared the coming catastrophe (2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chron 34:22-28). A later midrash asks why, since Jeremiah was around at the time, they didn't ask him. The answer given is that he was out of town at the time, and besides, she was a relative, so he didn't mind! Finally, there is an unknown woman, the wife of Isaiah, who is called a prophet (Isa 8:3) It is interesting to note that, contrary to some later Christian practice, celibacy was not required of these women to exercise their ministry or have access to the sacred: at least three of the four were married.

Women prophets in the New Testament and early church are also noted. Elizabeth and Mary both speak prophetically of the identity of Mary's child. Mary's song is a prophetic canticle like those of Miriam and Deborah that proclaims the coming messianic age and its effects. Anna, too, though Luke does not give her voice, is a prophet who is described as speaking of the coming redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:36-38). The legend of the four unmarried prophetic daughters of Philip living at Caesarea (Acts 21:9) yields very few later traditions, but remains as testimony to prophetic women living in the early communities, as does the problematic mention of women prophets by Paul in 1 Cor 11:5, those whose head covering—or not—causes him a great deal of concern. We sometimes

fixate on the argument and fail to notice that the passage testifies to women prophets at Corinth who were influential enough to catch Paul's attention.

The later prophetic movement known as Montanism in the second half of the second century was theologically orthodox but apparently given to some excesses that earned it condemnation by many church leaders. Its leading figures were a trio of one man and two women named Priscilla and Maximilla, some of whose prophetic oracles have come down to us. The dreams and visions of the martyrs of Carthage, among them Perpetua and Felicitas, were to be counted as on a par with the previous prophetic voices of the apostolic age.

To sum up this part of the discussion, these are some characteristics of prophecy as I see it. First, *the prophet is reluctant*. Second, *exercise of prophecy comes at personal cost*. It does not win you friends. Third, *the message is ambiguous*; it is not at all clear what is the obvious line to choose, and we can recognize it as true prophecy only after the results are in. Fourth, the exercise of prophecy is *not limited by age, class, race, or gender*. The effect of prophecy is to engage the minds and hearts of people to commit themselves to doing God's work. Prophecy is the living word or deed that impels to constructive action and pushes us to deeper and wider connectedness with life and with God.

Let us turn now to some reflections on how to recognize prophetic word and action in our world today and in our own experience. *First, prophets do not primarily predict the future*. Rather, they interpret the present in light of what they know of the past and what they see of the future. They say what they see will happen if we do not act in the correct way now. They are not always right, hence the ambiguity of discernment.

Jeremiah preached one way to go politically, but there were other prophets saying the opposite. Huldah in the time of King Josiah of Judah saw that the people were not keeping their part of the covenant by their failure to observe the law of Moses, so she made some dire predictions based on the operating theology of the day, a theology of retribution, whereby God punishes personal sin with death and public sin with political disaster and destruction. Israel would be destroyed by the Babylonians because it had not kept covenant with God. The authors of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles are in agreement with this understanding of history. It is one way of answering the perennial question, why do good things happen to bad people and even worse, bad things happen to good people? Other attempts at answers were to challenge that idea later, like Job's silence before the mystery of God and John's answer to the predicament of the man born blind that it is so that the glory of God might be made manifest (John 9:2-3).

Those of you especially who do hospital ministry know that this image of the punishing God is still very much with us, and it hits people when they are most vulnerable. If today we do not think that it is a very good answer to the question of the suffering of the innocent, then it is up to us to search our tradition, our minds, and our hearts for better answers, or perhaps just to stand silent before the mystery.

But my point here is that one of the functions of prophecy is the gift to see a little more than most see, to see what is behind the scenes, and to see, in light of the past, what are the implications for the future.

Second, prophets speak the difficult word. I almost said that prophets do not hesitate to speak the difficult word—but sometimes they do hesitate, for reasons already discussed: the price that may have to be paid. Prophets do not take pleasure in inflicting

pain, but nevertheless, that is sometimes what happens. The result is usually not that everyone rises up and calls you blessed. For a long series of years, Jeremiah spoke gloom and doom in Jerusalem. He says that everyone mocks him because he must cry out: “Violence and destruction!” (Jer 20:7-8) Can’t you hear it? “Here he comes again, the pessimist!” The prophets of Israel were often involved in crucial political decisions that would affect the history of the nation, or in critiques of misuse of funds or abuse of the poor by the rich, all situations that were not destined to make them popular with the powers that be. Simeon, our New Testament Temple prophet, spoke blessing and promise, yet he also had a hard word to an individual person, Mary: “And a sword will pierce your own soul” (Luke 2:35). They spoke what they heard from God regardless of what the effect would be for themselves. It takes courage to do that; some might call it *chutzpah*. It takes courage to stand up against authority, whether civil, ecclesiastical, or in employment. And the trouble is: we’re not always going to be proven right. Ouch! That’s the hard point. “But what if I’m wrong?” Then you’re wrong, that’s all. So try again!

Third, prophets speak of hope and redemption. This is the encouraging, the building up, when that is what is needed. Jeremiah’s prophecies are full of dire threats of destruction at the time when he was yelling and screaming at the politicians to make the right international decisions to save Israel from destruction by the Babylonians. Alongside all of the terrifying threats that Jeremiah felt impelled to deliver come words like the following:

Just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord....The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new

covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah....I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jer 31:28-34 NRSV)

The later chapters of Isaiah invite all who thirst to come to the waters and drink (Isa 55:1-2), to go out in joy and be led back in peace (Isa 55:12), and to be comforted in time of sorrow with tender words (Isa 40:1-2).

In the New Testament, Zechariah, Mary, Simeon, and Anna proclaim a time of rejoicing because redemption has dawned. They speak in poetry, what we often call "canticles," that is, songs. While of course Luke has composed these songs, he is drawing from a long history of traditions of oral poetry, often the product of women, as in two cases here, that of Mary and Anna, though only Mary's song is actually given. That song of Mary, what we call the Magnificat, is based as literary composition on the song of Hannah in 1 Sam 2. The song of Deborah in Judges 4 and the song of deliverance in Exodus 15 come from the same tradition. Prophets often speak dire words because that is what is needed at the moment, but the overriding message is that God is still there and will keep God's promises.

Redemption brings with it the hope of *reconciliation*, a reality so needed in today's world: reconciliation among nations, tribes, political parties, families, and persons. Those who devote their efforts to bringing about reconciliation touch some of the darkest aspects of human nature, and some of the brightest. Reconciling is one of the

riskiest actions that people can take, and often there is little incentive to do it, yet those who succeed are themselves engaging in prophetic action as signs of hope for the world.

You have asked me to reflect on prophecy and prophetic action, but I want to take just a moment to mention the other side of the balance. In ancient Israel, there was an institution of monarchy, and with it a closely allied priesthood, since palace and temple in ancient Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies were part of the same social structure. Prophecy ordinarily came from outside that structure, from the general population, though there were instances of priests who were also prophets, e.g., Ezekiel, but he prophesied at a time and place when there was no operative Temple in which he could exercise his priesthood. Institutional religion without the challenge of prophecy could have become stagnant and rigid. Prophecy without a stable social and religious structure provided by the Temple and priesthood could have produced chaos. Instead, it provided a healthy balance to those who represented institutional power.

In every Christian community as well, there are both gifts. Prophecy is not an activity limited by recognized training and certification. Rather, it is a spiritual gift given to some persons for the building up of the community through challenge and counterpoise to the way things are. Similarly, what I am calling “priesthood” here should not be equated with ordained priesthood. It is the gift of maintaining stability and providing the recognized avenues for relationship between people and God. Prophecy is its complement, the gift of stirring things up when they have become too predictable, and calming things down with comfort when they have become too frightening and threatening. There are prophets and priests in this sense on both sides of the ordination divide.

There is public ministry in which the prophetic word takes on public issues of justice and decisions about questions that affect all of society. It is here that most of the energy around prophecy is focused, and for good reason. There is plenty in our social and governmental decision making and our way of life that needs to be addressed publicly. Preaching and action for justice and peace are some of the more obvious ways in which this kind of prophecy happens.

We are also probably the most individualist culture that the world has ever seen, and indeed, this is part of the problem of getting people to address the wider social issues. We want to think of them as individual, even personal problems. Our traditional understanding of sin is still based on individual acts or omissions, but it was developed in cultures of the past that were sociocentric, with strong social pressures to conform to a set of behaviors, so that the social dimension could be presumed. Today's egocentric culture supports individualism more strongly than solidarity, so that we are working uphill to create a sense of corporateness in our communities and a sense of sin and grace as social. The focus on individual sin doesn't serve here as a counterbalance to a strong social pressure to conform, but rather reinforces the concentration on the individual rather than the good of society.

I do not believe that prophecy has ceased, but rather that it continues in the church—without prejudice to its ongoing presence in Israel and other societies as well. But in our individualist culture, prophecy also takes on new forms. The Holy Spirit is clever that way. I believe that, alongside public prophecy, there are also, forms of personal prophecy with which the Holy Spirit continues to act in us. Some of these forms are closely connected with ministries in which you engage: spiritual direction,

reconciliation processes between and among persons, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the bringing of spiritual healing in many different ways. Note that I am not saying that ministerial activities like these are by their nature prophetic; rather, they are more likely priestly. But there are moments when what is said or done on these occasions penetrates in such a way that the recipient comes into a new awareness of the vital presence and action of God in the here and now.

When Paul discusses the benefit and effects of prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14, he says that even the outsider or unbeliever is called to account, so that the secrets of the heart are disclosed, and that person will worship God, saying “God is truly among you” (1 Cor 14:24-25). Paul’s reference is to the effect of prophecy in a community context. It happens there, and it happens as well in one-to-one encounters.

The general situation of prophets in the Old Testament involved them in political and public religious situations: political alliances, the threat of enemy armies, oppression of the poor by the rich within the covenant community, religious legalism, and the like. The keynote was challenge and warning, because the fundamentals of the covenant were being ignored or transgressed, except in cases of extreme suffering such as that of exile. Inasmuch as Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels as a prophet, he brought challenge to those in power and comfort to the powerless, as the saying goes, “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

In the first generations of Jesus-followers, as believers were becoming established in the cities of the Mediterranean world, the members of the communities were people who by and large had very little connection with the places where political decisions were made in the Roman world. They were rather the recipients and often victims of those

decisions. So prophecy took a different turn there, to hidden and symbolic ways of critiquing imperial power, and to the inner dynamics of the community: mission initiatives, warnings of adverse events, and especially the building up of comfort and confidence within these small communities that were soon to be set at odds with the larger structures of empire.

Today in the world as we live in it, it seems to me, we have both situations. Those who prophesy and receive prophecy are in both public and private realms. We bear responsibility for the decisions that will affect the public good and lead us to war and disaster or to peace and prosperity. Chaplains are often in the position to be able to influence those decisions more or less directly by your preaching, your witness, and your counsel in public situations. At the same time, you are always dealing with individual decisions that will affect personal lives, in pastoral ministry of counseling and consolation, of encouragement and presence, as people make everyday decisions about their lives and their future.

Prophecy is about decision making. It is about calling what we see as God would call it. If we are going to have the nerve to speak in God's name, we had better stay as connected with God as possible, and we had better make sure that all of the criteria discussed here apply.

Once again, the words of Paul: "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecy." In our churches today, I think there is great danger of despising prophecy. Mark 3:28-30 refers to the "unforgivable sin" of being unable to distinguish God's Spirit from the evil spirit. The unforgivable sin, it seems, is the refusal to hear with an open

heart, so that the effect of prophecy referred to by Paul in 1 Cor 14:25, having the heart torn open, cannot happen.

The Spirit of prophecy continues to be alive and well in our communities. How well do we hear her voice and respond? Once again St. Paul: “Seek after the spiritual gifts, but especially that you might prophesy” (1 Cor 14:1). And the last word goes to Moses: “Would that all God’s people were prophets, and that God’s spirit would rest upon them!” (Num 11:29)

Questions

With what biblical examples do you most identify?

What characteristics of prophecy do you think are most apt for the contemporary situation?

How have you experienced the prophetic Spirit acting in others or in yourself?

How is your ministry prophetic?