

## **In Praise of Prophets**

Isaiah 40: 1-11 & Mark 1: 1-8

*Second Sunday in Advent/ 4<sup>th</sup> December 2005/ Sacrament of Holy Communion*

Sometimes the juxtaposition of life events arrange themselves before our eyes in startling and surprising ways, saying, “Pay attention” or “Wake up.” I was in a Starbucks Friday downtown working on this sermon. Sometimes I like to write and think and read away from the church out in the world – and if you want a good slice of the world go to a Starbucks or, if you don’t like their coffee go to Caribou Coffee, even if you don’t like coffee, go to a coffee house, order tea, or chai, or hot chocolate, but go and look at the people. That’s what I was doing with my papers and books all spread out with a general sense of what I wanted to say after I prayed. I took a few minutes and looked through the window out into the streets and watched the people going by. Over the speakers came a selection of Christmas offerings, Vince Guaraldi’s (1928-1976) cool jazz from “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” I kept watching the streets, listening to the music, “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,” conscious of the texts before me, the words of the prophets Isaiah and John the Baptizer. I saw the diversity of people going by bundling up against the cold and wind, wondering, “*What does this text mean at all, out there in the world, to them, to the ordinary person in the street?*” “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” Which people? These people?

I stared out the window some more when I began to smell something and quickly knew that smell; I had smelled it before. It was the smell of a person who hadn’t showered in a long time. I turned around and saw a young disheveled man sitting at the table behind me. At first, I must confessed, I was annoyed by the smell – and then I remembered what I was *doing*, of these texts claiming me in the flesh, “Comfort, O comfort my people says your God.” So I inhaled and took in a deep breath of that smell. He was resting his head in his hands, he wasn’t drinking coffee (couldn’t afford Starbucks), but it was warm inside. He didn’t have a coat;

his clothes were full of holes. He wasn't there long. I didn't even hear him leave. Within minutes two older men, both in wheelchairs, were wheeled in and sat at the same table. They were physically and probably mentally disabled. They didn't talk to each other; they just sat there with some coffee. "Comfort, O comfort my people says your God."

This imperative at the beginning of Isaiah 40, at what scholars call Second Isaiah, signals a shift in Israel's consciousness of Yahweh in a time of exile. The directive to provide comfort, is not, as we might assume, directed at us, demanding that we need to offer comfort. Instead, the divine imperative is directed toward the divine council of the heavens gathered around Yahweh, the angelic attendants around the throne of God, the messengers of God. Yahweh informs the heavenly council, *you*, go and provide comfort for my people, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, her penalty is paid, that she has received at the LORD's hand double for her sins." Now it's time for some tenderness. Good news, to be sure. Handel (1685-1759) did a marvelous job setting this text to music in his *Messiah*. But before we become too elated with liberation, remember *why* Israel was there.

Second Isaiah was written to a people in exile, far from their homes in Babylon. How did they find themselves in their own literal *Mesopotamia*?<sup>1</sup> Israel, God's people, gave up on Yahweh, turned their backs on Yahweh's mission to bless all nations through them.<sup>2</sup> They curved in upon themselves and sought to craft a future without God. In going after wealth, they forgot about the widow, and the orphans, and the poor in their midst. "One of their greatest sins was its tendency to degenerate into a wealthy nation that forgot to exercise justice and charity for the poor and the oppressed."<sup>3</sup> Their leaders were more concerned with the growth of

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Jon Stewart of the "Daily Show" (Comedy Central) for this double-entendre he uses to describe the contemporary quagmire that is modern-day Iraq.

<sup>2</sup> God to Abram: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12: 2-3)"

<sup>3</sup> Delores S. Williams, "The 'Sense' of Advent," *Christian Century*, November 21-28, 19901, p. 1092, [www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=740](http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=740).

the economy, the people suffered; they lost their nation and faced the anguish of exile. They turned their hearts away from Yahweh and forgot the people. But now God decrees they've suffered enough, it is time for them to go home and start again. Yahweh will provide a way and a place for them to be.

Isaiah begins to sense that Yahweh is about to do something new. "Comfort, O comfort my people." God will provide a way for them to return home, a divine superhighway will be built back to Jerusalem, the city of peace. Nothing will hinder their return, valleys and peaks will be leveled making it easy for everyone to travel this way. In the rescuing of God's people, God's glory will be revealed for the entire world to see. This is what Isaiah feels compelled to say. In the wilderness of their alienation and exile the wild God of Israel will prepare a way, Isaiah say, "*In the wilderness, in this apparent godforsakenness, in this mess we find ourselves in, God is going to do something new, and even though everything going on around you right now would lead you to think that I'm crazy, I'm not.*" God gives this vision and when Isaiah speaks the divine word new worlds, new horizons, new possibilities begin to open up for them.

Such is the life of a prophet. They were less fortune tellers and more messengers of Yahweh, compelled to speak on behalf of God. They are women and men overshadowed by the presence of God and given something to say, an utterance of judgment and hope. It is a terrific burden to have a *word* that cannot be contained or silenced; to do so would inflict untold harm to one's spirit and inevitably the world. They are given a *word*, a *word* that must be said for the sake of the people – *people who very often don't want to hear it*. It's a tough vocation. People discount, make excuses, come up with all kinds of reasons not to take them seriously. Prophets don't appear to be normal (but then again, normalcy is never deemed a virtue in the Bible), they weren't part of the establishment (God has no special preference for the establishment). The prophets are "uncredentialed," with no formal training, no seminary degrees, no

clearances from their presbytery to preach.<sup>4</sup> They are outsiders and usually speak against the dominant culture. Like poets and artists, they see things the rest of us do not have the courage to see; they feel things most of us don't have the honesty to feel; they imagine a world that most of us would deem unrealistic, and because their divine word is often disruptive and a threat to our reality, they are challenged and questioned, sometimes beaten, even unto death. The prophet questions our well-ordered lives that we have ordered quite nicely without any reference to God or we bring in God when it's convenient or safe. Yet, these "non-establishment figure[s] who will not be silenced" are the very ones God turns to and counts on – *every time* – to announce when something new, amazing, and gracious is about to appear.<sup>5</sup> Thank God for them, because they wake us up. For without them we'd all be lost. We need to be asking, who are the people speaking for God today? Who are the prophets? Maybe it's those speaking on behalf of the people.

Fifty years ago Thursday, Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus where blacks had to sit in Montgomery, Alabama, an act that sparked the civil rights movement in America. When asked if she had planned to sit up front, she said no. But she had enough. She said, reflecting back on that moment, "I had decided that I would have to know once and for all what rights I had as a human being and a citizen of Montgomery."<sup>6</sup> All her life she and others were told, "Don't get in the way." "That's just the way it is."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 628: "In principle, the prophet are uncredentialed. But because their utterances characteristically speak against dominant culture, either the buoyancy of dominant culture or its despair, it is inevitable that they are challenged and that they must seek to give some justification for their utterance. That is, revelation...is profoundly unwelcome, for it invades a life well-ordered without serious reference to Yahweh."

<sup>5</sup> John Barton, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1986), p. 112, cited in Brueggemann, p. 623. This paragraph on the role of the prophets is indebted to Brueggemann, p. 622ff.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Siegal, "All Thing Considered," National Public Radio, October 25, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> U. S. Representative John Lewis of George interviewed by Robert Siegal. I'm grateful to the Rev. Lauren McFeaters, Nassau Presbyterian Church, Princeton, NJ, for the reference to this interview in her sermon "Blessing Time," 13<sup>th</sup> November 2005

*But, you see, that's a lie, it's not the way it is in God's world – tell the people, comfort, O comfort my people.* Tell the people, the people, the people, it's always about the people in scripture, flesh and blood. God gets really angry at times in scripture, but God never gives up on the people – *all people*. So that a violation against one human being is a violation against God.<sup>8</sup> This means human rights is not just a political issue and a special day at the UN (which is next Saturday), it is first a theological imperative because it is God's desire to seek the welfare of all people – *all people*.

Is this not what Christ came to make abundantly clear with his own humanity? Is this not what John the Baptist foretold? *Prepare the way for the Human One who frees us to be authentically human. Prepare the way for the Human One.* Isn't this what Christmas is about, the power of God to save humankind so we can be human again? – and not humankind in general. In a *Peanuts* comic strip Linus once explained, "I love [human]kind, it's the *people* I can't stand." But it's for particular people, real, live, flesh-and-blood people who are lost and forsaken, crushed down and without hope, the broken and the excluded, for those cursed in their wealth and cursed in their poverty who sit in a Starbucks without a cup of coffee surrounded by people with their laptops and lattes, who need to know God wants nothing more than to feed them, to wrap arms of tender love around them, and make a home in the city of peace. Somehow the good news has to make sense out there; otherwise it makes what we do around here, at Christmas or any other time, a sham – a sham.

I went to Washington and joined friends to pay my respects to Rosa Parks when she died. The line stretched down the hill and snaked back and forth across the mall, a wonderful sea of humanity. Black and white crowded together to celebrate the life of one person who changed the

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. John Calvin (1509-1564) speaking of God's commitment to human persons after the flood (Genesis 9: 1-7), "God deems himself violated in the violation of these persons." Cited in Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis – Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 83. Brueggeman makes see this as a theological ground for Karl Barth's (1886-1968) thesis in the *Humanity of God*. "God unqualifiedly aligns himself with every human person as of ultimate value to him (cf. Matthew 6:32)." Brueggemann, p. 83.

world. I wish you could have all been there to feel the spirit of hope and goodness; it was almost festive. I felt underdressed, most of my black brothers were in jacket and tie and my black sisters were decked out in hats. We were standing on the curb on Third Street. Officers began clearing the street to make way for a motorcade. “Whose motorcade?” I asked. The park ranger said, “Rosa’s.” So we waited and watched as the hearse came along followed by an empty 1955 DC Metro bus, followed by another bus full of family and dignitaries. We could see the casket in the hearse and then the entire crowd began to applaud and cheer – I never clapped for a casket before! It was almost as if she said with her life, “*I belong here. I deserve a place in this world. I have value and worth. And so do you.*” It was a holy moment. And then it became clear to me in that moment what I’m trying to say this morning and what I hear in these texts and what I want us to see as we approach Christmas: *it is holy to live in the struggle for human rights, for this is what holiness does – it seeks the welfare of people.* There goes a prophetess; Third Street has become the highway of our God, prepare, prepare the way of the Lord.

The next day the *Washington Post* reported that as folks walked past her casket you could hear people softly uttering simple words that filled and echoed throughout the rotunda. They were saying, “Thank you.” “Thank you.” “Thank you.”<sup>9</sup>

And is this not unlike what we say at this table? “Thank you.” “Thank you.” “Thank you.”

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<sup>9</sup> *The Washington Post*, 31<sup>st</sup> October 2005