

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, February 1, 2009, 4th Sunday after Epiphany, dedicated to the memory of the Rev. Dr. William Barndt, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, to the prophets, and always to the Glory of God!

“Welcoming the Prophet”

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20 and Mark 1:21-28

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The Book of Deuteronomy contains a section known as “The Torah of Moses,” or the “Law of Moses.” Here, Moses authorizes the leadership roles of judges, kings, priests and prophets. From the earliest days of Israel, the prophets were among the leaders of society, along with elders, deacons, kings, and royal officials. Some prophets, like Isaiah, were influential members of the royal court.

The prophet was the only legitimate channel of communication with God. While the power of kings was limited, the power of the prophet was limitless, for when the prophet spoke, God spoke and often the earth trembled. Here, Moses rolls out the programmatic intent of the prophet. He simply says, “*There will be a prophet like me (in Israel).*” Imagine a prophetic clone of Moses! Cast in Moses’ imagination, such a prophet would intercede for his people, suffer as their representative before pharaohs, kings and God Almighty, and in the end die on the edge of promise for the people he delivered from

slavery! Imagine such a prophetic leader in the house of the Lord and the halls of the king forever!

Now this prophet was not to be a prognosticator of the future – one who proclaimed things such as the Steelers by three in Super Bowl XLIII! Not at all! The prophet was and should always be someone who tells the truth. And a true prophet is one who tells us what God wants us to know, rather than one who tells us what we want to know. The prophet reminds people of their covenantal obligations. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “*The prophet is a person who sees the world with the eyes of God, who holds God and (humanity) in one thought at one time, at all times.*” (Heschel as quoted from *Etz Hayim*, p. 1097)

While Deuteronomy intimates that a “true” prophet is one whose predictions come true, while the utterances of a “false prophet” do not, Jeremiah clarifies this a few centuries later when he writes that the truth or falsehood of biblical prophecy is about speaking the truth. In Jeremiah’s description, if the message is painful for the prophet to utter and the people to hear, it is likely authentically from God (Jeremiah 28:8-9). But, if prophetic words are popularly received, we have reason to doubt them, and the prophet would have doubt to trust the authenticity of the message as well (Ibid).

The false prophets we meet today often offer promises of false profits and prosperity to people. They used to be those identified with swampland in Florida.

In his classic, *The Prophets*, Heschel has written the definitive book on the prophets. Here you find more than 500 pages of eloquence, poetry, and theological clarity. In the opening chapter, “What manner of man is the prophet?” Heschel writes:

The prophet is a man who feels fiercely. God has placed a

burden upon his soul and he is bowed and stunned at man's fierce greed. Frightful is the agony of man, no human voice can convey its' full terror. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and humanity. God is raging in the prophet's words.

*To the prophet, no subject is as worthy of consideration than the plight of man. Indeed, God himself, is described as reflecting over the plight of man rather than contemplating eternal ideas. (God's) mind is preoccupied with (humanity), with the concrete actualities of history rather than with the timeless issues of thought. In the prophet's message, nothing that has bearing upon good and evil is small or trite in the eyes of God. (Heschel, *The Prophets*, pp. 5-6).*

Heschel continues that the prophet combines poetry, emotion, imaginative language, concrete diction which is rhythmical in movement, artistic in form and yet reflective of agitation, anguish and a spirit of non-acceptance. He says, "*The prophet seldom tells a story, but cast events. He rarely sings, but castigates. . . . His images must not shine, they must burn*" (*Ibid*, p. 6).

Concluding his opening chapter Heschel writes:

*Prophetic sympathy is a response to transcendent sensibility. . . . The prophet lives not only his personal life, but also the life of God. The prophet hears God's voice and feels God's heart. He tries to impart the pathos of the message together with its logos. As an imparter, his soul overflows, speaking as he does out of the fullness of his sympathy (*Ibid*, p. 26).*

But, the prophet is not just a construction of one man by our one God for one (other) faith community. The power and purpose of the

prophet is for Christianity as well. While God places a prophetic stamp on Israel's forehead proclaiming, "*My chosen people are authorized and led by my transcendent purpose,*" God's stamp is upon us as well. God's clear provisions for a human agent who makes concretely available God's transcendent purpose are our provisions, too!

Just as the prophetic voice in Israel is no accident, no mistake and no intrusion into the life of the community, it is the same for us. The prophetic voice, demanding and discomfiting as it may be, is constitutive for Christians and Jews. While Moses mandates that Israel's community must host, feed and heed the prophet, his words are for us as well! The very fabric of life in ancient Israel is woven together through prophetic imagination and vocal chords of God found in this human transmitter! The community must welcome the prophet!

In Mark 1:21-28, we meet the reason why prophecy is not just "old school," but our school as well. Fifteen-hundred years after the time of Moses, one might assume that the time of the prophets is past. Jeremiah is a name most mothers don't choose for their sons and God has not spoken through anyone since Malachi, 500 years earlier. Then in Galilee arises a man of a humble family who "teaches as one having authority and not as the scribes." He might be a prophet of God.

Everyone is keeping their eye on this young man. How will he fair on the big stage of history. Everyone is listening when he is teaching. Then he comes upon one of the world's true unfortunates. This man is desperately ill. He hasn't asked for this condition, but he is buried in transgressions and his tirades speak of the illness that holds him. He listens to the carpenter from Nazareth. Then he yells at Jesus, "What have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, you are the Holy One of God!"

Jesus speaks to the voices coming from within the man. He cries out, "Silence!" Momentarily, the man's body shutters violently and the demon is gone. This prophet of God known as Jesus is teaching and healing with the purpose, power and authority. With this incident of healing and grace, the spotlight is on the man of Nazareth. His public ministry is launched. Some will call him a false prophet, a glutton, a drunk, a blasphemer. Some will say that he is Moses. Others will say that the prophet Elijah has returned on full form. Others will suspend judgement.

But, anyone paying attention in this disposition of demons by the young man from Nazareth will have to admit, as the demon possessed man said so well, this one is "the Holy One of God." (Drawn from *The Christian Century*, Jan. 27, 2009, Lawrence Wood, p. 18).

I ask us today to open ourselves to the prophets of ancient Israel, to the prophet we call the Christ and the prophets of our times. As we do, we will be shaken, opened and sobered by the truth – if we are able to hear it. Maybe then we will welcome the prophet. Amen.