

# **“Always Aspiring”\***

**Jeremiah 1:4-10, I Corinthians 13, Luke 4:1-30**

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 30, 2022, Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, dedicated to Sr. Rose Ann, Sr. Margarete, Sr. Jackie Sr. Diane, Sr. Pat and all the Dominican Sisters of Peace who care for the earth, Alec Deitz, Dr. Lynn Wallich, Al Waddell, Brian Cave, Dennis Secor, Peter Murray, and all the 2021 elected lay leadership of First Congregational UCC, to my staff and most of all, to my wife, Susan E. Sitler who has been a rock and an inspiration through my 23 years of ministry at First Church and my 36 years of marriage and ministry and always to the glory of God!

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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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By his own admission, Jeremiah was a reflective, private person for whom the hard public life of a prophet of God was absolutely abhorrent (Jeremiah 15:17-18). So, even after God clearly says, *“I chose you to be my prophet while you were still in your mother’s womb,”* it isn’t surprising that the introverted Jeremiah responds, *“I don’t know anything. I am only a boy. I don’t want this job.”*

But Yahweh is not taking “no” for an answer. The God of Abraham, who created the Universe and each one of us, reaches down and touches Jeremiah’s lips and literally impresses on the young man the gravity of his new job. God says, “*You are working for me now. You will speak for me. Your job is to pull up and tear down, take apart and demolish, and then start over, building and planting.*” Thus begins a job of prophecy that will continue for the next 50 years. That’s right. This is a lifetime assignment.

The relationship between God and God’s prophets is very much “in your face.” For Isaiah it is a burning coal on his lips and a lot more (Isaiah 6:1-8). For Ezekiel it is three chapters of wild beasts flying around and finally God’s word served as a meal in which he consumes the scroll with the prophecy as a meal (Ezekiel 1:1-3:3). For Paul, God knocks him off his high horse. God has to literally blind him and silence him because he can’t see straight and he certainly can’t hear well and he talks too much. And until God finds somebody on the ground who can communicate with him what Paul is supposed to do, Paul is left in this state. For Jesus, God speaks when he rises from the water of baptism God speaks. As he goes in the wilderness, God ministers to him with angels. Upon the mountaintop, God appears again. And throughout his ministry, his death and his rising, God is constantly coaching God’s only begotten son on how to be a prophet.

This week, I had some “in your face” time alone with God. I had time alone to pray, to read, to write, to meditate, to literally “walk on frozen water” (more commonly known as snow) through the woods, farm and fields as I reflected each day on prophetic gifts that God gives us and God’s grace. I walked for miles each day through the

frozen land, listening to and watching God's creatures great and small surviving in the harshness of winter.

As I followed their hoofprints, claw prints, and pawprints in the snow, I came to a realization: we can no longer view the prophetic as a gift and activity reserved for human beings alone – certainly not for a select group of human beings only. I believe, as I walked in creation this week, that all creation is crying out. All creation is prophetic because, from our faith perspective, all creation is infused with the prophetic and wise spirit of the divine. Thus, all creation communicates the wonders, the mystery, the complexity, the beauty of the divine. Creation is crying out and speaking to each one of us. Are we listening? Creation is asking for us to care and is crying out for justice.

As part of creation, we as human beings, regardless of status, race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, age, ability, religious belief or no belief, ALL have the potential to be prophetic and to act prophetically. For those of us who are Christian, by virtue of our baptism, we are anointed into the prophetic tradition and called to embrace and exercise our prophetic charism and vocation.

I believe each one of you is called to be a prophet – by virtue of your baptism. I believe this is not just a “guess work,” I believe it is a “God work” for all of us – by virtue of our baptism.

This gift of grace invites you to speak and act to social, political and religious leadership, to judicial officials, to power brokers, to those involved with our community's economy and well-being. To act prophetically is to work for justice, to align ourselves with humans and nonhumans living on the margins and trying to survive; to de-center and eventually dismantle power structures while unseating

their leaders who would do harm to humans and creation. Each of us – in our own little ways – is called to be a prophet of God – and “no” (as we have found out from Jeremiah) is not the answer.

In reality, however, one needs to ask this question: “Is the pandemic being weaponized by the world’s powerful techno-feudal lords as a means to ‘reset’ the global economy so that the wealthiest of nations and the wealthiest citizens in nations can enrich themselves and flourish at the expense of others’ demise and devastation?”

We need only to tabulate the astronomical profit gains of certain industries – including the pharmaceutical industry, the gun industry, the telecommunications and social media giants such as Zoom, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, the mega-corporations like Amazon – whom we often seem to be addicted to and serving rather than the other way around, to figure out what is happening.

All of these many gains and efforts are occurring during this present time in history as non-Western nations like those in Africa, Asia and Latin America sink deeper into poverty, and people around the globe struggle to make ends meet without a just wage afforded to them, in an era of tragic loss with no end in sight.

As God’s prophets standing with humanity and all creation, we have to ask – who are Judah’s kings and princes, priests and people today whom Jeremiah would address in a bold and unwavering way? Who would Jesus and Paul be speaking directly to today? Where are the prophetic voices and persons addressing the “great reset” now, in a time when “compliance” seems to be the order of the day and loyalty to leadership the reverses values that we hold?

Who are the ones? You are the ones! You are the prophets God needs to speak and act on behalf of all creation. Please don't say you are too young, too old, too busy, too committed, too this or too that. You know God doesn't take no for an answer (we've already covered that ground). So God is speaking – so let's not run and hide.

I will go one step further.... we, of all people, should be aspiring to rise, to shine, to speak out and change these conditions. I was reminded of that last month, when I read, recorded and delivered to you the sermon preached by Dr. Lichliter, December 6, 1931, the day this Cathedral of Grace was dedicated. In his sermon 90 years ago, Dr. Lichliter spoke of "The Spell of the Gothic." He said the spell of the Gothic and the cathedral spirit is one which rises and is "always aspiring."

While this "Always Aspiring" spirit calls us time and time again back to incredible Cathedral of Grace, this beautiful Temple of God's holiness, in the words of the Apostle Paul to the people of Corinth – the belief that "YOU are temples of God" is what really matters. You are the ones called to follow and lead. You are the living presence of God, whose spirit is enshrined within your heart. You are the ones through which God is always aspiring in this world.

The moment is upon us to emerge from isolation. We all need to do that. We need to enter our communities and the global arena prophetically, to read the signs of the times, and to expose and address the crucial issues of our present realities before the "survival of the fittest" economically, socially, politically and culturally takes shape in a new world order already evolving behind our masked existence. The time is now.

As I walked among the freezing little ones in creation this week, I could hear their tiny voices calling – calling for help, calling for care. They will be our partners in this time and the time ahead because we are connected to them and we cannot abandon them.

Remember the prophetic word is always a graced word, and no matter how searing it may be, the prophetic word always invites transformation. It calls us to always aspire to a better way and a better world.

The Gospel account of Jesus speaking in the synagogue reminds us that prophets are not accepted in their own land – more specifically in their own home towns. Indeed, political, religious and social leaders want to toss prophets over the cliff because prophets shake up the status quo – and that’s what Jesus was doing. But that is a reason to be inspired and not to quit.

For those of us who dare to act prophetically like Jeremiah and Jesus in our world and with all creation hungering for hope and a vision of justice and peace, we have the promise of the presence of God. “I am with you always to deliver you,” says the holy one, whose power working within us continually empowers us to work that must be done.

Finally, Paul reminds us that love is the greatest of all things – of all virtues and all values. Love and justice must always be at the heart of our prophetic mission. It is an insatiable love for the divine and for all creation, making the work of justice ever more compelling and forever alluring that calls us to aspire even more.

So, my friends, as each one of us is God’s temple, each one of us called to prophetic witness on behalf of humanity and all creation,

may this new year of serving God at First Congregational United Church of Christ be the year in which we are ALL always aspiring to follow God and be Christ's witnesses in the world. Amen.

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\* I have drawn from the reflections of Sr. Carol J. Dempsey, a Dominican Sister of Caldwell, New Jersey, and a professor of Biblical Studies at the University of Portland, Oregon, from her *National Catholic Reporter* article, "All Creation is Prophetic," appearing in the January 21-February 3, 2022 issue.