

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

9.30.12 Sermon: “Prophetic Encounters”

Presenter: Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore

Prophets often rub our noses in things we'd rather avoid – but listening to them can save our lives.

Imagine yourself living in the splendid ancient city of Nineveh. You and your friends have been influenced by wealth and descended into wickedness. God takes note and sends a prophet named Jonah to wake you up to your evil ways. Jonah proclaims “Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” The people listen to Jonah, recognize and turn away from their evil ways, and proclaim a fast and put on sack cloth – a way of showing repentance. The king responds too asking everyone to do the same, to fast, to wear sack cloth, to lament, hoping God will “turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not.”

Much to Jonah's displeasure, God “saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and did not do it.”

Mythic Biblical stories like this one teach the value of encountering a prophet and responding. These stories reiterate the human tendency to deviate from the high road of righteousness and take the low road of licentiousness. Numerous Biblical prophets, often from the ranks of the oppressed, rise up to call back the Jewish people to their covenant with God, particularly the wealthy and privileged leaders who have strayed, following their own selfish interest,

Those prophets were not neatly sealed up in those Biblical stories, their work finished. They continue to rise up, walk among us and raise their voices.

During the first half of the nineteenth century here in America, former slaves became prophets. Former slave, Frederick Douglass, gave his first public speech against slavery in 1839 in Nantucket. The great champion of abolition, William Lloyd Garrison who was in the audience, was deeply moved by his speech. At the end he rose and said, "Have we been listening to a thing, a chattel personality ... or a man?" "A man! A Man!" responded the crowd. Garrison called out "Shall a man be held as a slave in a Christian land?" The crowd stood cheering Douglass and lined up to shake his hand. Garrison and Douglass became lifelong friends and collaborators after this encounter.

In 1848, two women became prophets. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention. A public convention on this scale had *ever been held* to discuss the injustices and oppression American women endured. This convention was exciting and bold, but also a risky venture. At this convention, Stanton proclaimed "So long as man exercised tyranny over her, injurious to himself and benumbing her faculties, that few can nerve themselves to meet the storm: and so long has the chain been about her that she

knows not there is a remedy." Several Quaker women from Rochester were so excited about the issues raised at Seneca Falls that they decided to hold a convention two weeks later in their city's Unitarian church. Its stated purpose was "to consider the rights of woman, politically, religiously and industrially." Susan B. Anthony's parents and two sisters were there and shared their excitement with her.

On August 28, 1963, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led a march on Washington for jobs and freedom. The march brought together civil rights organizations with different approaches and agendas from the Congress of Racial Equality, to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the NAACP and the National Urban League. They demanded passage of meaningful civil rights legislation; the elimination of racial segregation in public schools; protection for demonstrators against police brutality; a major public-works program to provide jobs; the passage of a law prohibiting racial discrimination in public and private hiring; a \$2 an hour minimum wage; and self-government for the District of Columbia, which had a black majority. What we remember today of course are the stirring prophetic words of Dr. King's "I have a dream" speech:

when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last."

Maybe some of our elders here were there in 1963 or watched King's speech on television. I suspect almost all of you have heard the prophetic voice ring in your ears. Maybe you heard a prophet speak at a protest or a political rally. Maybe a professor challenged you and stirred the fight for fairness in your belly. Maybe an elder or a family member lit you up as you listened at their knee as a child. Maybe a religious leader's inspirational words touched you deeply. However you might have encountered a prophetic message, you recognized that prophetic voice because it moved your heart and changed the direction of your life.

Larger than life visionaries like Jonah, Moses and Jesus, Douglass, Stanton, and King dominate our imagination of what a prophetic encounter might be like. Yet author Dan McKanan sees another way these encounters can happen in a far more egalitarian and democratic way. He calls them "identity encounters."

[These take] place when people who lack institutional authority discover their own power by coming together, sharing stories, and claiming a new identity. The experience is much like religious conversion, and it is the greatest source of radical power.

The American Colonies over 200 years ago, were the seed bed of these encounters. Soon to be

patriots met in taverns to share their grievances over their treatment by the British crown. In a land influenced by Puritan thought that rejected the divine authority of the king, they claimed their own access to revelatory insight and experience. God could use them to bring forward a prophetic condemnation of British tyranny. The belief that God can choose anyone as a prophet provided the religious foundation for democracy and self-government.

Identity encounters arose in the early 1800's that saw the stratification of wealth as the young American nation developed and the prosperity was shared unevenly. The invention of the cotton gin and the creation of large mills in river towns turned manufacturing shops into big factories. The labor system that moved the apprentice to the journeyman to the master broke down. Lower skilled factory labor now was done by women and children. The fruits of their labor went to the capitalists and factory owners creating a new class of working poor. They found a common identity as workers, different from the expanding class of owners and investors who profited without working.

In 1839, Margaret Fuller gathered women together who were intellectuals and social activists for conversations in Elizabeth Peabody's West Street bookshop. Though women might be taught the same subjects as men, they had little opportunity to use their learning. Fuller provided a setting where they could discuss what they knew, free to explore ideas and speak their own thoughts on such topics as classical mythology, education, ethics, the fine arts and woman. Fuller asked probing prophetic questions like, "What were women born to do?" and "How shall we do it?"

The origin of the modern experience of identity encounter arose during the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the 1950's. This year long struggle united an oppressed community who had never acted together from their common identity. Many walked miles, wore out shoes, and suffered greatly but stayed off those buses. Religion figured prominently to support that struggle and became the place where ordinary folks encountered each other and their shared struggle for equality.

The Freedom Riders of the 1960's discovered their solidarity in prison as they refused to have their spirits broken. The Stonewall riots galvanized the Gay and Lesbian community in New York City. Women met in consciousness raising groups finding their common oppression that energized their voices of resistance.

In one to one personal encounters, they discovered their shared experience of the emotional wound of oppression. They recognized the shared experience of internalized discounting of their personal worth. And they felt the amazing power released through opening up and talking about that shared pain.

Some of you already know this. You've lived it and felt that power surge in your body. Others of you may not have been moved in this way. Either way, we know, *today*, there are many prophets clamoring at the door. We hear their voices preaching at us through the

media. Their messages fill up our email boxes. They tweet and Facebook across our screens. Most of us are overwhelmed by it and feel the urge to withdraw.

That ability to self-isolate is one of the mixed blessings of modern society. More and more people are living in segregated and gated communities. Most of us move from one place to another in individual cars. We work in cubicles and sit in front of screens all day. The communities we participate in are self selected religious organizations, schools, and circles of friends. We can easily screen out those prophetic messages by avoiding certain neighborhoods, changing channels, turning the newspaper page, clicking delete, and only see and hear what we want to see and hear.

The sanitized, isolated, protected life may be pleasurable for a time, but it isn't sustainable nor is it ultimately satisfying. The walls we create are temporary as we share the same planet and the same human condition. The effects of increasing carbon dioxide in the air, contamination of our ground water, lakes and streams, the depletion of soil nutrients and the poisoning of our land will touch us all. No wall can keep the flaming torches of the oppressed masses away forever. Like Nineveh, sooner or later, we must answer the prophet or face the consequences.

Our congregation can be a a great place for transforming prophetic encounters to happen. We can encounter the social change organizations that use our building. We can encounter our neighbors through the work of our Community and Connections Committee and the work of the Social Responsibilities Council. We can encounter those of different religions through interfaith work such as the Capital Area Council of Churches dinner happening here on October 17. And we can encounter each other through Small Group Ministry, Circle Dinners and Adult Education programs, all of which are starting up next month. My challenge for you this morning is to open yourself up to one of these ways to allow that prophetic encounter to happen and change your life.

That encounter may not require you fast and put on sack cloth but the Jonah story is still instructive. Ninevites listened to Jonah, repented and were saved. Jonah however was not changed by the experience. Rather than being happy that people's lives were saved, he was angry God turned him into a false prophet. He wanted to be right and resented God's mercy and compassion for Nineveh, people he despised anyway.

The real prophetic encounter results in a change of heart. That change may not be immediate, but it cannot be denied. That change of heart changes our intentions that changes how we live our lives. That change is grounded in our relationships with each other, grounded in love. That love, when experienced collectively, actualizes the Beloved Community.

Here is how Dan McKanan puts it:

When human beings encounter one another deeply, in the midst of their struggles for freedom and equality and community, prophetic power is unleashed. This is power to

denounce, to condemn those who would “grind the faces of the poor into the dust.” in the words of Isaiah. It is also power to announce—to proclaim God's kingdom that will be realized here on earth, the beloved community of black and white and brown together, the new society within the shell of the old. Prophetic power enables people to speak boldly in the face of brickbats and bludgeons and fire hoses. It empowers them to tell new stories and build new communities.

...By telling our stories and sharing our lives, we can glimpse the face of the divine and change the world.

May we find that prophetic power through prophetic encounters and tell new stories that become a renewing foundation for this congregation and the community that surrounds us.

Notable references quoted:

Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights Movement By Sally McMillen 2009

Frederick Douglass: American Hero by Connie A. Miller Sr. 2008

Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition by Dan McKanan

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Fuller

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