



LESSONS for LIFE

February 1, 2009 11 a.m.

EVEN IN THIS ECONOMY THERE IS STILL A "PROPHET"

Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, C.M.

SACRED READINGS:

LESSON: DEUTERONOMY 18: 18 - 19

GOSPEL: MARK 1: 21 - 25

Oh those Old Testament prophets. They were an obstinate bunch. They were loud. They were persistent. They kept getting in trouble. They kept stirring things up. If they had only been a little bit quieter then we would have gotten our rights a lot sooner, but they stirred things up. Yeah sure. Look at Moses challenging his people to shake off their own slavery and move out of Egypt; challenging Pharaoh to change the economic system that slavery under girded. Then later Moses challenged the religious traditions and practices of his own people. Look at Elijah, the prophet, a fiery prophet who denounced the King and the Queen. That got him into trouble. Or Esther a Queen herself and yet a prophet fighting against the oppression of the Jewish people and risking her own life. Isaiah, the prophet, warning against social wrongs and false worship. Jeremiah challenging people to live by faith and not by religious practices alone. Now people really disliked him. He wrote a book about prophecies and the King burned it so he wrote a second one. Then there was Micah challenging the rich to care for the poor and especially challenging the rich city of Jerusalem to care for the poor in rural areas.

Well things didn't get much better in the New Testament. We had John the Baptist, that prophet. He yelled and screamed about repentance, about people changing their lives and their attitudes. He ate locusts. He wore leather. He attacked the leaders of his day and he certainly attracted attention. Then it got worse.

Along came Jesus. Another prophet he took on the religious fundamentalists of his day turning over their tables in the Temple. In Matthew 23 he called the Fundamentalists hypocrites six times. Blind guides, he said. He called them blind fools, serpents, brood of vipers. Didn't exactly make himself popular and then he took on the political leaders.

Down through the centuries prophets have consistently challenged the status quo, consistently challenged inequities, consistently challenged oppression and discrimination. Sometimes they have been tactful, usually not. Sometimes they have been polite, but usually not. Sometimes they saw change in their own time, usually not. Usually it came much later.

In our more recent history, the trend of prophets being raised up by God continues. In our day we have environmental prophets like David Suzuki and Al Gore challenging us. We have health care prophets like Tommy Douglas challenging our systems. We have city, urban living prophets challenging how we live together in cities and in communities like Jane Jacobs and Richard Florida. And we have Spiritual prophets like Martin Luther King Jr. challenging religious movements to take on oppression, but to do so non-violently. Spiritual prophets like Eckhart Tolle talking about spiritual awakenings or spiritual prophets like Virginia Mollencott challenging gender assumptions. And there have been prophets in the



LESSONS for LIFE

GLBT community like Harvey Milk and Troy Perry and Nancy Wilson. Now political prophets in these days are very often imprisoned whether in South Africa or Burma. And I wonder about Louis Riel here in Canada. I wonder.

Prophets calling us to denounce slavery throughout history like Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad and the Harriet Tubman Resource Centre at York University. Now open for you to visit.

Often established religion was the target of the prophets. Often, established religion was the problem but, sometimes religion was on the side of these irritating prophets. In the 1800's the Free Presbyterian Church in Canada helped Underground Railroad refugees to buy land. On the shores of Lake Erie helped them to establish a successful community of land owners. In Nova Scotia the Reverend Henry Alline reached out and wanted to welcome Black people into his church; Blacks and Whites as equals he said. And yet he was maligned by those in power who characterised him, and I quote, as "a wild, emotional, bible thumping, madman dashing around the country shouting the Gospel from horseback and ignorantly condemning those who were more intellectually oriented and those who were committed to a much more orderly, formal type of worship." And yet he preached a message of freedom to all who would listen.

In the late 1700's the Reverend David George, born a slave in Virginia, escaped into Canada, built congregations in Nova Scotia and they burned his chapel in Shelburne, so he had to escape. So he decided to go God's country, New Brunswick (laughter) to open a church there that would be open and welcoming to all. When he arrived on the shores in Saint John, New Brunswick word had spread that he was arriving and people rushed to the shore to greet him as he stepped off the boat and he gave them hope that they would have a church too.

In the 1800's there was a prophet named Mary Ann Shadd Cary. She was a school teacher, a newspaper publisher, an editor, an abolitionist activist and a women's rights advocate. Some say she was the founder of the feminist's movement in Canada, but that history does not give her credit because she was Black. She was educated and she was angry. She attacked discrimination wherever she saw it. She attacked inequality wherever she saw it and especially in the education system and particularly segregated schools which in 1850 were the law in our land; segregation in schools. She used her newspaper to protest. She wrote hundreds of letters to politicians challenging them to move towards justice. She used her education to teach and she started three schools open to everyone.

So what of today? In these trying, in these trying economic times there are still prophets to be made. God is still raising up prophets in our midst to challenge us, to remember those in need, to challenge us to look at our ways of living, to challenge us to examine our values. Some of those prophets are part of the Toronto City Alliance here in Toronto. Some of those prophets are part of the May Tree Foundation here in Toronto; this week launching some new initiatives reminding us that in this city of Toronto 44% of the citizens were not born in this country - the highest percentage of any city in the world - Toronto - twice that of New York City. In all of Canada 16% of our population are visible minorities. And yet visible minorities only make up less than 2% of all government employees, less than 5% of school teachers, less than 4% of judges, less than 3% of police officers, less than 6% of elected officials and over 56% of the corporate boards in this country have no visible minorities on their boards. This week the Toronto City Alliance and the May Tree Foundation launched seven initiatives to change that. Proud of our city and where we are heading.



LESSONS for LIFE

During these challenging economic times there are also prophets among us challenging us in our response to make sure that as we have stimulus packages and as we set aside billions of dollars to kick start our economy that we don't sidetrack our concern for the poor and the unemployed. We have been fighting too long for initiatives to adequately address poverty for it to be sidelined by a stimulus package

Jesus a prophet calling for change in religious life; how we worship, how we include people, calling for change in religious practices, how we celebrate God's presence. Jesus, a prophet, calling for us to change our personal life, our social life, our political life and the life of our institutions. So what about MCC Toronto today? We have a great history of being a prophetic voice. This month as we celebrate Black History, Black Heritage Month and recognise where we have come from and today as we celebrate a new Lesbian Prime Minister of Iceland and a move forward by the Anglican Diocese of Toronto there is much that we can celebrate together. But if there were prophets among us, what would they say to us? What would they say about us? I think they would challenge us.

I'm going to apologise for embarrassing him, but there is a prophet among us and his name is Jim Marshall. Jim and his wife worship with us, have now for quite a while. Jim brings with him a background as the Head of Economic Justice Issues for the United Church of Canada, has involvement in a Round Table of organisations throughout Canada working on homelessness and unemployed issues. But more importantly, he brings a passion for United Churches and Metropolitan Community Churches to be involved in social justice work and I've asked him to share that passion with us in two weeks. I am proud, Jim, that you have said yes and I am proud that you bring that passion and that wisdom and that experience to this place. I hope that you will challenge us to be more than we have been, to be all that we can be.

Over the last 32 years that I have been the Pastor here I think it's fair to say that generally whenever we have taken on a social justice issue it's been one that I have initiated and generally that I have carried the load and joined with a few of you around to help. But I have been the initiator. Frankly folks, it is probably long overdue that it is time to pass the torch. I believe that through Jim's vision and his passion and the door that he will open for us that it's time for the church to join together in a social justice way to initiate, to educate, to advocate and for the church to do it together without waiting for me to initiate. Now, I'm not giving up my involvement. I'm going to be around and I'll be helping and I'll be stirring things up, but I don't want to alone and I don't want to have to always initiate it.

Sometimes prophetic voices are calm and reassured and reassuring and reasoned, like Jim's. Sometimes they will irritate us and I would hope that when the prophets speak that we do not dismiss the message because they happen to be irritating or sometimes maybe not tactful. I think those prophets will continue to challenge us, to be a stronger voice for social justice in our world. Yes, to be a strong voice for international human rights for GBLT people. That's part of our roots, but also to be a strong voice for many other justice issues.

We have been given an unbelievable access to power and we need to use that wisely to advance social justice. I think the prophets among us would challenge us about our lack of inclusion here in this place. I had meant between the services to draw up a big piece of paper that said on it "Gay Church" and I wanted to tear it up for one final time. Heterosexual people should not have to be asking us if there is a place here for them, wondering if they are going to be welcome and fully included. It should be so obvious by our actions that my house is a House of Prayer for All People.



LESSONS for LIFE

I think the prophets among us would be challenging us about our sporadic support for people with hearing impairments to make sure that there are more folks involved in a more quality way to be able to help those who are here so there aren't Sundays when the message is silent. I think the prophets would challenge us about our inclusion of families in this place. To make sure there was family support not just during the 11 o'clock service, but other services and activities and things in our church so families can come and be fully a part of our church. I think prophets would challenge us in the comfort and wonder of this place, in the majesty and the beauty of this place to not forget that for each of you sitting in the pew there are thousands of others who would give anything to know that they could be here too. And that we cannot lose our passion for those outside of this building and that we must find new and creative ways to reach out and to communicate to them in this city and around the world.

I think prophets would challenge us into action, to speak loudly, yeah sometimes politely, sometimes tactfully, sometimes as the nice lobbyist and sometimes as the angry folks yelling outside the doors.

I celebrate the progression and the progress we've made. I celebrate Black History Month, Black Heritage Month and the rich contributions of those who in quiet and loud ways have moved us forward. I hope that we continue to be prophetic voices. I hope that you will be prophetic voices and I hope that we will listen to the prophetic voices among us. For who knows but that we have been called for such a time as this.

Amen.