



LESSONS for LIFE

February 1, 2009 7:00 p.m.

EVEN IN THIS ECONOMY THERE IS STILL A "PROPHET"

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The Scripture reading this evening I want to share with you are the two verses from the book of Deuteronomy the 18th chapter beginning to read at the 18th verse; *I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among the people and I will put my words in the mouth of this prophet and the prophet shall speak to them all that I command. And whoever will not give heed to my words which the prophet will speak in my name, I myself will hold them accountable.*

Oh, if you know much about the Bible you know that those Old Testament prophets were quite a group. They were an obstinate bunch. They were loud. They were persistent. They kept getting in trouble. They kept stirring things up. You can take a look at Moses who challenged his people to shake off slavery and move out of Egypt; later challenging Pharaoh also to change the whole economic system of Egypt which was built on slavery and then later challenging the religious traditions and practices of his people. Then there was Elijah, fiery prophet, who denounced the King and the Queen; didn't make himself very popular. Then there was Esther who was a Queen herself and yet a prophet and she fought against the oppression of the Jewish people and risked her own life to do so. Then Isaiah warned against the social wrongs and the false worship of his day. Jeremiah challenged people to live by faith and not just by religious practices and people really got to dislike Jeremiah. Eventually he wrote a book about prophecies and the King burned it so he wrote another book about prophecies. Then there was Micah who challenged the rich to be concerned about the poor. In particular, he challenged Jerusalem, which was a very wealthy city at that time, to be more concerned about the poor in rural areas around Jerusalem.

And things didn't get much better in the New Testament. You have this obstinate person called John the Baptist. He kept yelling and yelling and yelling about repentance, meaning change, for people to change their lives. He ate locusts and he wore leather and he attacked the leaders of his day. He certainly attracted attention and he wasn't very popular.

Then there was the prophet Jesus. He took on religious fundamentalism and it's so unfortunate that people misinterpret that. So much of the anti-Semitism of our day arises from the fact that people misinterpret what Jesus did. Jesus didn't take on the Jewish faith. I believe Jesus never intended to start a new faith. I think he wanted to reform Judaism from the fundamentalist leanings of his day, so he took on fundamentalism not Judaism. So he turned the tables upside down in the Temple. In Matthew 23 he called the Fundamentalists hypocrites six times. He was on a roll. He called them blind guides, blind fools, serpents and a brood of vipers. He also took on the political leadership of his day.

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



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In more recent history, the trend of prophets being raised by God has continued. We have environmental prophets today like David Suzuki here in Canada or Al Gore. We have health care prophets like Tommy Douglas. We have urban or city prophets like Jane Jacobs and Richard Florida. And we have Spiritual prophets like Martin Luther King taking on discrimination, but challenging people to do it in a non-violent way. And Eckhart Tolle talking about spiritual awakening using new language, powerful language or Virginia Mollencott, who we are hoping to have here this fall sometime, who has raised a very prophetic voice today challenging gender assumptions and rigid gender definitions. In the Gay and Lesbian community there have been Human Rights prophets like Harvey Milk or Troy Perry or Nancy Wilson. Political prophets today often tend to be imprisoned whether in South Africa or Burma. And I wonder about Louis Riel here in Canada. Might he have been written up differently in the history books if he were viewed as a prophet calling for change?

Prophets have called us to advance in Human Rights denouncing slavery. Harriet Tubman began and extended the Underground Railroad and, now that the strike is over at York University, you can go to the York University Resource Centre – the Harriet Tubman Resource Centre at York University - and read about her life and accomplishments.

Often organised religion were the target of the prophets. They were angry about how religion was practiced. Sometimes religion was on the side of those irritating prophets. Here in Canada in the 1800's the Free Presbyterian Church helped the Underground Railway refugees to buy land and helped them on the shores of Lake Erie to establish successful communities of land owners. In Nova Scotia the Reverend Henry Alline decided that he wanted his churches to be open not just to Whites, but also to Blacks and he irritated the religious establishment. Here is how the establishment characterised him. They wrote about him in the 1800's that he was "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 who were committed to a much more orderly and formal type of worship." And yet he preached a message of freedom to all who would listen.

In the 1700's the Reverend David George, born a slave in Virginia, escaped into Canada, built congregations in Nova Scotia, predominantly Black, but open to all. In Shelburne, Nova Scotia they burned down his church, so he felt it was time to leave Nova Scotia and he went to God's country, New Brunswick. When it was announced he was coming to New Brunswick. He was coming by boat into Saint John and as he was arriving on the shores of Saint John many of the slaves actually left serving lunch to their masters and came down in their servants garb to the shores of the lake to meet him because they were so excited about having a church. They were so excited about having a church where they were welcome.

Then in the 1800's a prophet named Mary Ann Shadd Cary was a school teacher, a newspaper publisher and an editor, an abolitionist activist and a women's activist. Some historians say she was the first feminist in Canada and the founder of the feminist's movement in Canada, but history did not give her that credit because she was Black, as she was seen as a Black Activist not a feminist activist. She was educated and she was angry about what she saw. She attacked discrimination and she attacked inequity in the education system especially segregated schools for in 1850 segregated schools were the law of the land and she attacked them. She used her newspaper to protest. She wrote letters to politicians demanding change and she used her education to start teaching. She started three schools open to everyone.



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So what of us today? In these times is God still calling forth prophets to challenge us, to remind us of those in need, to look at our ways and our values? I believe the answer is yes. Some of those prophets today you can find at the Toronto City Alliance. Some of those prophets today you can find at the Maytree Foundation. This week those two organisations join together in some new initiatives and at the launch we were reminded that (in) the City of Toronto, 44% of the people in Toronto were not born in this country. How many of you were born in another country? 44% in Toronto were not born here. That is the highest percentage of any major city in the world. It's twice the percentage of New York City, 50% more than the city of Las Angeles and Sydney, Australia. In Canada as a whole 16% of our population are visible minorities. Now remember that figure, 16. And yet, less than 2% of all government employees are visible minorities, less than 5% of secondary school teachers, less than 4% of judges, less than 3% of police officers, less than 6% of elected officials are visible minorities. Fifty-six percent of corporate boards in this country have no visible minority representation. They announced seven initiatives this week to change that, exciting new initiatives.

During these challenging economic times when we're looking at stimulus packages, billions and billions of dollars being invested there are prophets challenging us to not leave out the poor and to not leave out the unemployed as we're investing those billions of dollars. The poverty initiatives that people have been working on for so many years which seem so close to really being implemented can not be side tracked by stimulus packages. They must be included.

Jesus was a prophet in his time. He called for change in religious life and change in religious practices. He called for change in political life and in social life. He called for changes in terms of personal practice and changes in terms of institutional practice. So what about us here at MCC Toronto as together we celebrate Black History Month, as today we celebrate a new Prime Minister in Iceland, the advancement of the Anglican Church of Canada? What about us? If there were prophets here, if God sent a prophet here to speak to us, what would that prophet say? I think that prophet probably would start out by honouring the prophetic role this church has played down through history. We have done some good, hard prophetic work. Sometimes we were tactful, sometimes we weren't. Sometimes we were polite and wore clerical collars and lobbied nicely inside government and sometimes we were screaming angrily outside the doors. But I think those prophets would also challenge us today in many, many ways.

In two weeks time at the morning service one of those prophets is going to preach here at our church. His name is Jim Marshall. He and his wife, Deborah, usually sit up there in the balcony. Jim has just recently retired as the Department Head for Economic Justice for the United Church of Canada. He was the Chair of the Round Table on Poverty and Homelessness coordinating YWCA's and YMCA's across Canada. He has a passion for United Churches and MCC Churches being involved in social justice activities. We've had a number of conversations and I've said, "Jim I want you to come and preach to the congregation." And I think it's so appropriate he is the first White man to be invited to preach here during Black History Month in many, many years. It's so appropriate that he is invited to come and share a message of social justice and to challenge the congregation to be more involved in social justice.

I think it's true to say that down through the years almost all of the social justice issues of our church have been initiated by me. Then I've invited some of you to be part of that in terms of the lobbying or the petitions or the demonstrations or whatever. It is now time to pass the torch. It should not be the situation that I am the prime initiator of our social justice work and I think it is a wonderful time now for



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us to form a group of folks who are interested in doing social justice work on a wide range of activities to come together and to initiate those activities. Some of the prophetic voices as I said are loud and impolite. Jim is calm and reasoned voiced.

I think if there were prophets here, they would also challenge us to be more involved in social justice. It's unbelievable the access to power that we have. There are politicians, police leaders, corporate leaders who have given me their cell phone numbers and they're in my Blackberry. I can call and I get calls back. We have an unbelievable access to power and we need to use that for good in other ways than we have used it in the past. I think prophets would challenge us to be more involved internationally in Human Rights. I think they would challenge us in terms of our lack of inclusion here at our church. We have much more work to do.

Last Sunday I preached and I used the phrase, our people, two or three times in my sermon and whenever I use that phrase I always mean Gays and Lesbians, our families and friends and supporters. I don't just mean Gay people. But I didn't define myself and last Sunday after church a woman came up to me and she said, "Brent, I'm a heterosexual woman and I just have to ask is there a place for me here in this church?" That question should never have to be asked. I wish I had a great big sign that said Gay Church and I wish I could just tear it up right now in front of you so we could put to rest once and for all, yes that's our roots, yes that's the majority of the people who worship here, but we're not a "Gay Church". We don't want to be a Gay Church. We want to be a House of Prayer for All People making sure that everyone who comes here can feel welcome and included and don't even have to ask, but will know that there is a place here for them.

I think prophets would challenge us around hearing impaired issues and the fact that people who are hearing impaired come to our church on Sunday night and have no access to our worship. Occasionally on Sunday mornings might, but not regularly. I think we would be challenged about our inclusion of families and how we make it easy for families to come and participate, not just on Sunday mornings at 9 and 11, but in other activities in the life of our church. I think prophets would challenge us to have a greater passion and commitment to reach out to people who aren't even here. For each one of you who are in a seat tonight there are thousands of people who would give anything to be where you are. It is a wonderful gift that you have to sit in the pew this evening and it is a tremendous responsibility that you have because for every one of you sitting there there are thousands of people, if they knew, that this was an option, if they knew, what we are about, would give anything to be here. So we have an opportunity to reach out anew, a responsibility to reach out in new and creative ways both locally and now through the web casting around the world.

This morning someone arrived for a meeting after church and she said, "Brent I couldn't be here for service, but I had to come for my meeting, but I watched the web cast before I came in." One of the guys went home the other night and he said he arrived home and he hollered for his partner. He said, "Where are you?" and the partner says, "Shhh, I'm worshipping. I'm watching the service as I missed the last two Sundays." Because now some of the previous services are on the site and he was able to catch up with his worship.

I hope that when those prophetic voices rise among us that if they're not polite, that we don't dismiss the message because we think the messenger is irritating. I hope we remain open to listening to voices that challenge us to be more inclusive and more active in the world and I hope you're one of those



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voices both in this place and in the world. For God has called you not only to listen to the voices around you, but to be one of those voices for justice in our world.

Amen.