

Ain't No Mountain High Enough

Isaiah 40:1-11 & Mark 1:1-8

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2nd Sunday of Advent

We lit the second candle of Advent a few minutes ago, proclaiming that this candle is for all God's prophets, confronting justice and restoring the dream of a world of freedom and peace. So today we think about what it means to be a prophet. What it means to confront justice and restore the dream of a world of freedom and peace.

So what does it mean to be a prophet? In his book, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg, writes that as a child growing up in the church he came to the conclusion that the biblical prophets were supernaturally inspired people who predicted the coming of the Messiah centuries before Christ's birth (p. 114). As a mature Christian scholar of the Bible, Borg says he came to realize that the prophets had deep personal experiences of God that informed, transformed and reformed their understanding of their religious traditions, and ignited within them a passion for social justice (pp. 125-126). Their personal experiences of God led the prophets to speak out against injustice in their society, to criticize those with power for misusing it, and to lift up the victims of injustice, affirm them as God's beloved children, energizing them with messages of hope (p. 130). We see both of these impulses in today's Scripture readings.

Our Gospel lesson introduces us to John the Baptizer, living in the wilderness, dressed like the ancient prophet Elijah in camel's hair, subsisting on a diet of locusts and wild honey. His message is a call to be baptized as a sign of repentance for one's sins. Later in this gospel we learn that John criticized Herod Antipas for marrying his brother's wife (6:17-18). Matthew tells us that when John saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism he called them a brood of vipers, urging them to bear fruit worthy of repentance (Matthew 3:7-8). In Luke's account John instructs his audience to do social justice. He tells people who have clothing and food to share what they have with those who don't have any. He tells tax collectors and soldiers not to extort money by fraud, threats or false accusations (Luke 3:10-14). John the Baptizer is a prophet who confronts injustice in his society, criticizes those with power, warns them of the consequences of their actions, and urges them to change their ways in anticipation of the coming of one who is more powerful and who will baptize them in the Holy Spirit.

In Mark's Gospel, the appearance of John the Baptizer in the wilderness signals the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But before John the Baptizer there was Isaiah, who five centuries earlier spoke to God's people. Isaiah's original audience consisted of Israelites who had been forcibly ex-patriated when Babylonian armies led by King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the kingdom of Judah, its capital city, Jerusalem, and its temple. They were prisoners of war, settled in colonies, put to work on royal building projects in Babylon, living off rations doled out by the Babylonian king.¹ Their state of mind is powerfully expressed in Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon —
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

¹ http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0006_0_06183.html.

On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land?

In the midst of captives singing sad songs in remembrance of their ruined homeland, God prompts Isaiah to sing a different song that begins with these beautiful words, “Comfort, O comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...”

What Isaiah offers is a song about God’s unbreakable love for God’s people. The song tells the truth that people suffer as a consequence for the choices that they and their neighbors make, trusting in things that were not God, getting their priorities inside-out and upside-down. The song tells the truth that all people — even God’s people — are as constant and faithful as the grass and flowers that wither and fade after a few short weeks. Isaiah’s good news is that God has not and will not abandon them. Isaiah’s song says that God is already on the way, building highways straight through the desert, lifting up valleys, leveling out rough places to get to them. God is ready and willing to reveal God’s self to all people. Isaiah’s song ends with the image of God as shepherd nurturing and nourishing a flock of sheep, gently cradling lambs, and leading mother sheep.

Isaiah’s song has been immortalized in the tenor recitative and aria at the beginning of Georg Friedrich Handel’s *Messiah*. It’s beautiful and powerful music. The point of Isaiah’s message might, however, be better captured in the second verse and final course of Diana Ross’ hit “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough.”² Imagine God singing these lyrics....

I know, I know you must follow the sun
Wherever it leads
But remember
If you should fall short of your desires,
Remember life holds for you one guarantee
You’ll always have me.

Ain’t no mountain high enough
Ain’t no valley low enough
Ain’t no river wild enough
To keep me from you.
Ain’t no mountain high enough
Nothing can keep me
...from getting to you...

Isaiah is a prophet who speaks to the victims of conflict and war. His experience of God leads him to proclaim that God has not abandoned God’s people but is coming to them, and nothing

² Mark Allen Powell at www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2266.

will stop God from being with them. Not exile, not even sin or death will keep God from coming and lifting them up.

We light this candle today for all of God's prophets, confronting justice and restoring the dream of a world of freedom and peace. We light this candle to remember and celebrate John the Baptist and Isaiah. We light this candle to remember and celebrate all the prophets including modern day prophets like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who confronted the Nazi regime during WWII in Germany and comforted his fellow prisoners at the Flossenburg concentration camp. Closer to home we remember and celebrate prophets like Martin Luther King Jr who confronted an entire culture of racial injustice and oppression, and lifted up the dream of a society in which people will not be judged by the color or their skin but by the content of their character:

I have a dream today.

...little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope.³

Isaiah's song was the foundation of Martin Luther King Jr's dream.

We light this candle today in acknowledgement that we are all called to be prophets. We don't have to wear camel's hair, eat locusts and honey, or live in the wilderness to be prophets. We act as prophets whenever we do social justice work, naming injustice as it happens, calling out the bullies in the schoolyard and in the work place; refusing to participate in shaming and blaming the poor, the vulnerable and the victimized. We speak in a prophetic voice when we lift up God's promise to comfort all those drowning in sorrow, grief or pain, all who are confused, lost or trying to hide, all who are consumed by fear, anger and hatred. We are prophets when we sing Isaiah's song, proclaiming that God is coming and is, in fact, already here not because we are worthy, not because we are ready, but precisely because we're neither worthy nor ready. We are prophets when we proclaim the good news is that there just ain't no mountain high enough, no valley low enough, no river wild enough to stop God's love for us, God's hope in us, God's dreams for us. Amen.

³ www.let.rug.nl/usa/documents/1951-/martin-luther-kings-i-have-a-dream-speech-august-28-1963.php