

The Gift of Prophets and Poets

Second Sunday After Pentecost

Jill R. Russell

June 3, 2018

Texts: 1 Samuel 3. 1-10;
 Psalm 139. 1-6, 13-18;
 2 Corinthians 4.5-12;
 Mark 2.23-3.6

I had the great gift a few weeks ago of being in NY for just a couple of days. I was there to see friends from seminary I hadn't seen in a long time one of whom is gravely ill. That was hard and sad, but it was very good to be together. The added gift was that I stayed with one of my very best in the friends in the world – a fellow RCA pastor – who I used to walk with every Friday when we both lived in NJ. On those weekly walks we would solve all the world's problems. You know those kinds. We were both in need of one of those walks.

For me it was just after the Summit on Race and Inclusion and the community conversation we had about a police stop in our neighborhood. I was feeling all of the tensions that quickly polarized in our community around that conversation. The tensions surfaced in the community conversation itself and most definitely in the social media reactions. Those tensions surfaced again just this week in a very constructive environment at the initiative of the public safety leadership along with a city official and clergy who had voiced their concern. Pastors Beth, Gordon, and I were all there along with others. It was a long meeting and it isn't done yet. I'm grateful to know that the conversation is going to continue. But on that day, as I was walking, I felt the urgency of this work. Because our proclamation about the peace of Christ and our love for our neighbor has to put on flesh in these hard places if it is going to be any good to the world.

For my friend it was the intersection of poverty and addiction and mental illness and homophobia. These forces are breaking the people showing up on the doors of her church. Figuring out how to do community and healing within the church while going full tilt at the level of system change, it is just exhausting.

We didn't solve a thing but we supported each other in remembering that there is One who searches and knows the fullness of it all. There is One who hems us in – behind and before – and who sees both of us in all of our need as we walked and

sees all the people whose pain and need was weighing heavy on our heart. It was a great gift to be together on those two mornings; to be reminded of the truth of this Psalm that God IS.

I saw a video clip this week by the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran Pastor, author and speaker, in which she said “As Christian Pastor, I’d like to welcome you to the apocalypse. Pull up a chair and make yourself uncomfortable.”¹ She reminded us that the word apocalypse in Greek means to uncover and reveal.² It’s like pulling back a façade to see what has always been there. We have apocalyptic literature in the Old Testament and in the New. Jesus himself speaks with apocalyptic imagery in the gospels. This literature springs up not to scare people into being good but to bring forward (in Nadia’s words) “a big, hopeful idea that dominant powers are not ultimate powers. That empires fall, tyrants fade, systems die. God is still around.”

I could not help thinking as we sit before a second call narrative for a prophet of God – the call of Isaiah last week and the call of Samuel this week – that the gift of prophets is this work they do of uncovering and revealing. They step into the tumultuous times when people feel overwhelmed by the problems of the world when it feels like dominant forces are pressing in and making it hard to live and people are scared and don’t know where to turn. Prophets step into these tumultuous times and sometimes with a word that is very unsettling they break through the noise and help us to see what really going on and where God is inviting us to trust and where God is inviting us to move.

This call story is very different from the one we heard last week from Isaiah. Samuel was just a small boy living in the temple serving as an assistant to the priest, Eli. On one level it’s a sweet story that should give us pause whenever we want to shush a small child and think that God only speaks through the adults in the room.

But it’s the second sentence in this story that really caught my attention: “The Word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” Isaiah’s vision and call to be a prophet that we heard last week came when the whole idea of “prophets” was a thing in Israel. Samuel was called at a time when no one had

¹ Link to this video clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olgaS6Pydc0>

² αποκάλυψη – meaning uncover, reveal, disclose or bring to light. Definition from William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 92.

heard a Word from God in a long time. Moses was long gone. They did not yet have kings in Israel and the idea of a prophet who would bring the Word of God had not yet come to be. It was a scary time in Israel. They had been living in these cycles where a wise judge would rise up to lead the tribes of Israel but then they would fall back into chaos and corruption. The cycles, if you ever read through the book of Judges, felt endless and rather hopeless. Eli – the priest whom Samuel served – had sons who should have brought that steady leadership to help the people to rise again to the image of shalom. To show the people a wholistic peace that God had given to them of right relationship and a flourishing for everyone in the community. But instead these sons were at the very heart of the corruption that was tearing their community apart. And Eli had done nothing to stave off that corruption.

So when he became aware that God was finally speaking a word when they had not hear a word from the Lord in generations, Eli had every reason to fear the apocalypse that was about to come. Because the peeling back to uncover what was really going on was going to expose his family. Yet, he sends Samuel back because he was ready to “pull up a chair and get uncomfortable”.

Unlike the religious leaders in Jesus’ day. Look, I do have empathy for the space the religious people of Jesus’ day were in. They were living under the strain of occupation. There was so much outside of their control. To have a clear set of rules, assumptions that were shared and consistent, to know with clarity what was expected....at least in their life with God they didn’t have to be uncomfortable. They could live in peace. Or at least that’s what they told themselves.

Until Jesus came along and did some uncovering. He revealed what Martin Luther King, Jr. exposed in his *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*. What they called peace wasn’t really peace in any biblical sense of shalom. No! There’s was a negative peace; the mere absence of discomfort but nothing more. And the closer you look and the further you peel it back, the absence of discomfort (which is a pretty low bar to begin with) is actually just for them and not for everyone. There was certainly not an absence of discomfort for those who had the misfortune of being hungry or in need of some healing on a Sabbath day.

But it was very unsettling for those who had mastered the rules...truly. Because Jesus was breaking those rules faster than they could keep up. I can hear their defenses shouting “What do you want from me?”

What Jesus revealed was really pretty simple when you strip all the extraneous baggage away. When people are hungry they need to eat. When people are sick they need healing. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Love your neighbor, not the rules but your actual neighbor as the one and only way to show your love for God.

The prophets, the poets, the playwrights – they have a way of cutting through all the layers that obscure us from seeing what is most needed and what is at the heart of the matter; helping us figure out what to trust and where to move. Creating communities centered around the heart of the matter in ways that are sustainable and equitable and feasible, now that takes the great gifts of intellect from all the disciplines and takes the experience from every corner of our community. There is a place for all of us in this work.

It often starts with the prophets and the poets who peel back the layers and help us to see. What they help us to see is two-fold: to see the beauty and the extraordinary power that is already there. The One who goes before us and hems us in before and behind. The One whose light can seep through the cracked and broken places. They help us know what to trust.

Then secondly, they help us to see what needs to move. What needs to be changed, what needs to be resisted, and what need to be worked around. “Is it lawful to good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” With that prophetic word, all of their legal wringing was silenced.

Sometimes just seeing where you need to go even if you are not yet there can make it possible to breathe free and feel joy and keep choosing love.

So I have an encouragement for you – an assignment if you choose to accept it – be on the lookout for the gifts of the prophets and poets. It could be a piece of art, a lyric from a song, a scene from a play or a segment of a speech. Anything that helps reveals the beauty and power already among us and anything that helps us to define the shape of our resistance or the direction we need to change. Anything that helps us to know what to trust or where to move.

If you’re willing, send it to me and I’ll find a way to share the places where we are hearing the Word of God alive among us. I have my contribution ready* and I look forward to seeing some of yours.

Folks, I believe in the extraordinary power that belongs to God!

It does not come from us but it is revealed within us and through us and among us even if we do hold this treasure in clay jars. Amen.

*This will be my contribution to the collection:

Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front³

By Wendell Berry

*Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.*

*So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what (humankind)
has not encountered (they have) not destroyed.*

³ One of the articles in **Reclaiming Politics (IC#30)**; Originally published in **Fall/Winter 1991** on page 62;
Copyright (c)1991, 1996 by Context Institute.

*Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.*

*Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.
Listen to carrion – put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.
So long as women do not go cheap
for power, please women more than men.
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
a woman satisfied to bear a child?
Will this disturb the sleep
of a woman near to giving birth?*

*Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is nighest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.*