

“The Bible: The Prophetic Voice”
Isaiah 61:1-4,8

One of the great themes of scripture is the prophetic voice which always calls people to faithfulness to God. The prophetic voice is about shaping the world into God’s vision. The old saying, “Words create worlds,” is so true of this theme. With their ability to connect deeply with God and to see reality through God’s vision, prophets in the biblical tradition call people back to God’s vision. In times of prosperity, they reminded their people of justice, letting go of greed, and taking care of the vulnerable in society. In times of despair, they reminded people of hope. In times of fear, they reminded people of faith and of God’s steadfast love. Their words shaped the vision of people who listened.

In her book, *The Cloister Walk*, Presbyterian author Kathleen Norris notes that, “A prophet’s task is to reveal the fault lines hidden beneath the comfortable surface of the worlds we invent for ourselves, the national myths as well as the little lies and delusions of control and security that get us through the day.” They were not troublemakers. Prophets had a specific role which reminded ancient Israel of their calling to be the people of God. In his book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes that, “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”

Here is a story about such consciousness. It is about Grace Thomas who ran for Governor of Georgia back in the 50’s and again in the 60’s. In the race for governor of Georgia in 1954, there were nine candidates—eight men and Grace. 1954 was the year of the famous *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* which opened the way for the integration of the public schools. The other eight candidates spoke angrily against the action of the US Supreme Court. Only Grace said that she thought the decision was fair and just. Well Grace came in last in the election. But eight years later, she ran again. At the time the Civil Rights movement was gaining momentum but her message of racial harmony among the people of Georgia was still very controversial. One day Grace Thomas made a campaign appearance in the little town of Louisville, Georgia. In those days, the centerpiece of the town square was not the courthouse or a war memorial, but an old slave market, where people were once sold and traded. In that place, a hostile group of storekeepers and farmers gathered to hear Grace Thomas speak. “The old has passed away, a new day with new possibilities has come,” she said, gesturing to the market, “this place represents all about our past over which we must repent. But a new day is here, a day when Georgians, black and white, can join together and work for the common good, a better world.” Someone in the crowd shouted out, “Are you a Communist?” Grace answered, “No, I’m not.” The heckler continued, “Well then where’d you get these crazy ideas about all of us joining hands and working together.” And without a word at first, Grace Thomas looked out and she pointed. She pointed to the nearby church. And after a moment she said, “I got them over there. At a church like that one.”

That is the task and power of the prophetic voice in the Bible. When we lose our way through the illusions of power, control, security, and egotistic esteem, the voice of the prophets can lead us back to what truly gives us peace, joy, and fulfillment in life. The

popular consciousness of the world often misleads us to believe that power, fear, exploitation, hate, and violence are the norms of the world. The prophetic voice calls us to live by God's values of inclusive and ever-expanding love, sharing, and care.

The prophetic voice is not always easy to hear because it often challenges our dominant perceptions that seem so true to us.

Today's scripture is about challenging perceptions of despair among the people of ancient Israel. The prophet Isaiah was comforting and challenging his people at the same time. They had come back from Babylon after the Exile and instead of reforming their ways, they went right back to business as usual, with greed and violence as the norms of their society while limiting God to worship in the temple. Even the rebuilding of the temple did not seem to go very well for them. It looked so shabby compared to its old days of glory. The immediate occasion for Isaiah 61 was an economic crisis that was caused by the unethical financial dealings of the wealthy in that society who used their influence to grab land and money from others. They manipulated the application of tax and financial laws to get an unfair advantage over others. For example, during times of bad weather and drought, they would make loans at extremely high interest rates. When the poor borrower could not pay the entire amount back in one year, the next year the unpaid portion would be rolled over into a second loan which would double their interest rate. After a couple of years of this kind of interest rate hikes, the poor farmer would be left bankrupt and become a slave to the landowner. All of this was not only highly unethical but also against the teachings of the Hebrew faith as found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy about not charging interest.

You can imagine how the words of the prophet were comforting and challenging. Isaiah called the people to remember that God has called them to a different way of life. They knew a better way to live and he was reminding them of it. Everyone is seeking happiness and fulfillment. The problem is that we often look for it in the wrong places. Wealth, power, esteem are attractive because the culture often lifts them up as the ways to happiness. But the prophet Isaiah knew better and yet he had compassion on these people. Instead of condemning them, he was trying to lift up God's vision for them to help them remember.

Even though the prophet names the pain and the injustices of his people, he does not give up on hope. He knew that deep down, the people longed for God's vision for the world. They just simply lost their way. So he lifts up to them the vision of Jubilee which is an incredible vision of hope and justice where debts are forgiven, land is restored, and slaves are set free. Even though their daily realities were nowhere near this vision of Jubilee, the prophet did not write them off as hopeless. Instead, he calls them again to greater faithfulness. He reminded them of the call to release debts, to free the oppressed, to release the land, and to practice economic justice in their daily life, justice that was based on God's vision for all to have enough and to have their economic systems be set up in a way that allows for the poor to be released from their poverty.

What is amazing is that Jesus a few hundred years later, picks up these words and uses them as his mission statement. He begins his ministry with Isaiah's vision and reminder to the people who were longing for release.

We are faced with very similar bitter realities of despair. The prophetic voice of hope and challenge gives us a vision of what is possible for us in the future. As human beings, we often forget that we are made in the image of God and that the only way for us to be happy is to live into the image in ourselves and in others instead of disfiguring it. We are called to listen to the voices of the prophets in the past and the present so that we may live into God's future where vision of the world is not based on what is popular or accepted by society but is based on our deep love for God and neighbor.

I would like to lift up to you a few prophets from the history of the church according to Diana Butler Bass in her book, *A People's History of Christianity*:

- Justin Martyr who thought of Christianity as an inclusive faith that was destined to bring diverse peoples together.
- Irenaeus, the first Christian theologian to teach deification.
- Gregory of Nyssa who saw the whole of Christianity as the story of love.
- Basil the Great who built one of the first Christian hospitals and a hospice.
- John Chrysostom who believed in the social redistribution of wealth.
- Martin of Tours who dedicated himself to nonviolence.
- Benedict whose monastic handbook organized community around the practice of humility.
- Jean Gerson who wrote a mystical theology of dying well.
- Francis of Assisi who modeled a kinship with nature and all creatures.
- Teresa of Avila who proclaimed that all Christians could cultivate a rich devotional life.
- George Fox who affirmed that everyone had access to God within by virtue of the Inner Light.
- Juana Ines de la Cruz who believed that secular learning led to holy understanding.
- Jerena Lee who championed the spiritual process of sanctification.
- Harriet Tubman who was an example of political fortitude as the most successful conductor on the nineteenth-century movement against slavery.
- Harry Emerson Fosdick who was convinced that people need a "spiritual interpretation of life."
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer who envisioned a fresh form of faith for a post-modern world.

We may not be on the list in terms of historical magnitude, but if we allow the prophetic voices of the past to shape us into the people of God, our present and future lives will be shaped by words that create new worlds of love and justice.

I would like to end with a lectio divina using the words of Psalm 19:14 as our focus:

"May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight,
Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer." Amen.