

Prophets

When we hear the story of John the Baptist, how often do we think of him as little more than an historical figure?

A relic of the past?

That John existed as a real person and not simply as some fictional character is well established.

Not only does he play a crucial role in all four Gospels, but Josephus, the Jewish historian who wrote volumes about first century Israel, comments on the ministry of John.

And while I'm usually the first to rebel when sermons get turned into history lessons, let's eavesdrop just a bit on what this non-Christian historian wrote about John way back around 90 AD — because it ties in with where we're going today with our gospel lesson — and with our faith!

“Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God as a just punishment of what Herod had done against John, who was called the Baptist.

For Herod had killed this good man, who had commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, righteousness towards one another and piety towards God.

Now many people came in crowds to him, for they were greatly moved by his words.

Herod, who feared that the great influence John had over the masses might put them into his power and enable him to raise a

rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best to put him to death.

In this way, he might prevent any mischief John might cause...

Accordingly, John was sent as a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Machaerus, the castle I already mentioned, and was put to death." Jewish Antiquities, 18:116-9.

Why does John's historical existence matter?

Perhaps because of our oh so human tendency to find a million creative ways to privatize, individualize and spiritualize our faith.

Which is a handy dandy way to separate what we believe from how we live.

And for most of us, confronting this dilemma becomes the central challenge of our life.

How do we actually live out this strange faith that makes so many demands on us?

Not the usual, culturally conditioned demands of what a spiritual person ought to look like.

Like, making a good impression in polite society.

And not swearing.

Or drinking too much.

Or getting angry.

No, the hard demands of our faith require so much more from us.

We're challenged to dig deep, and forgive.

We're encouraged to be generous, not out of our excess, but out of our need.

We're instructed to extend mercy, even when it's not deserved.

How often do we stop before even trying, because we're convinced such things can't be done?

Which is why it matters that folks like John actually lived in this world.

And did their best to live out the difficult demands of our faith.

Because, prophets didn't die out with John's generation.

Prophets arise in every generation.

And frankly, as Christians, we are all, to one extent or another, called to take up the task of being a prophet in this world.

A task that falls with greater weight on all clergy, to be sure, because what's the point of wearing the collar if we're afraid to be led toward places of risk?

If we're afraid to stand with the truth tellers?

But prophecy is also a task that the entire priesthood of all believers shares.

To be a prophet is to be a witness to God's truth in this world.

A truth rooted in forgiveness, mercy and compassion to be sure.

But also a truth rooted in justice, equity and human dignity.

In service to the least, the lost and the left behind.

There's a wonderful method to this madness!

Because when we actually live our faith, when we become the hands and feet of Christ, we become connected to the source of all that is.

It's from within that precious flow of life that joy is born!

These musings about our calling to be prophets hit home when I learned Archbishop Desmond Tutu had died.

Like many of you, I got to meet him when he visited us at the Cathedral several years ago.

And frankly, you can hardly think of a less likely prophet for our times!

Small in stature, a product of apartheid terrorism, he went on to become a beacon that shined gospel hope throughout the world.

He fearlessly advocated for human dignity and equality.

He made regular forays into the midst of riots and violence, urging peace.

And through it all, he laughed, especially at himself.

All of this formed the man who served as chair of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

A commission that helped steer South Africa away from civil war and toward an inter-racial society based on mutual respect, atonement, and forgiveness.

This beloved Archbishop was one of many called to be a testament to the power of God moving in our times and in our communities.

As our own presiding bishop noted last week, in commenting on Archbishop Tutu's death:

"Perhaps we best give thanks by honoring his legacy — not merely with lip service to racial justice and reconciliation, but with lives dedicated to this work.

We do this by learning to live together as the children and family of God.

No longer hurting each other or God's creation.

But together living the dream God intended.

For in God's dream, as the Hebrew prophet Isaiah said,

'they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.'"

And so the question our gospel lesson asks us today, the question that the legacy of Archbishop Tutu poses to all of us, is this:

Where might we, as today's prophets, be called to lift our voices?

The answers are legion.

Locally, the ticking time bomb of the Navy's fuel tanks at Redhill might be such a place.

80 year old tanks, some of which haven't ever been maintained, sit 100 feet above a major aquifer on our island.

One that provides clean water to some 400,000 people.

A series of leaks that have already contaminated water supplies to nearly 90,000 people points to our need to speak up and speak out about preserving this precious natural resource.

As housing prices skyrocket and many of our elderly now live lives that are house-rich but cash-poor.

Have you seen the Foodbank lines in Aina Hina?

While our younger people can no longer afford to own a home.

Who among us are called to use their expertise and analysis to pester lawmakers who can make changes needed to increase housing supply?

To tax absentee owners?

And to otherwise move toward a more equitable society?

And nationally, as this week was the ignominious anniversary of the failed insurrection in Washington DC, voting rights and the integrity of our votes are under assault in too many places.

Who among us shall be a voice for fairness, decency and full participation of all people in our government?

In response to these questions, perhaps you're wondering:

What's this have to do with our faith?

The answer of course is — everything.

The life of the prophets, the life of Jesus, was never about minding our p's and q's so we could sneak into heaven (or be marched in with a brass band!)

Their life was about helping us make this life beautiful.

Serene.

Joy-filled.

Which can happen!

But only when we are in right relation with ourselves.

With each other.

And with God.

And that right relation begins with how we have structured our society: which these days GIVES much to the few — and TAKES much from the many.

It means finding ways to talk out our differences, rather than fighting them out.

It means a willingness to be wrong.

To be open.

To change.

Such is the legacy the prophets leave behind.

Shall we pick up their mantle?

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