

“Prophets, Then and Now” by Tim Hall

5th Sunday after Pentecost (Year A) – July 2, 2023

[RCL (Track 2)]: Jeremiah 28:5-9, Psalm 89:1-4,15-18, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42

O God, our strength and our redeemer, unto whom all hearts are open and all desires known, we pray that you would give us ears to hear your call, eyes to see your beauty in the world, and hearts to know your love... through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

For my homily this morning I’m going to focus on the theme of prophets and apostles. And since it’s 4th of July weekend, I’ll try to explore this theme within the context of our nation. As we will pray in our collect of the day shortly, *“God has built his church on the foundation of apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone.”* But there have been prophets and apostles throughout the ages, both before and after our blessed savior walked among us,

As we just sang in our gradual hymn, *“God of the prophets, bless the prophets’ heirs!”* And then we went on to sing about Elijah passing the mantle to Elisha, and in verse 2, the work of a prophet, and in verse 5, that of an apostle.

In our Old Testament reading from Jeremiah we see two prophets having an exchange. It’s a small clip, a trailer if you will, into a much larger narrative. And just as trailers often don’t actually reveal everything about the movie, this snippet doesn’t tell us all of what’s really going on.

The year is approximately 584 BCE, just a few years into the 70-year Babylonian exile. Jeremiah has recently been threatened with death for prophesying the long exile and for other warnings he’s given against the priests and people. At the Lord’s command, he has fashioned a yoke for himself to wear as he prophesies that, at the Lord’s command, Judah must serve Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and then his son and then his grandson. He warns of false prophets saying otherwise... that the exile will end soon.

Then, just before our reading this morning, Hananiah does just that – in the presence of Jeremiah. After hearing Jeremiah’s response, Hananiah takes the yoke from Jeremiah’s neck and breaks it, indicating his unbelief in Jeremiah’s prophesy and predicting himself that within two years the Hebrews will be returned to their homeland. Jeremiah is dismissed. But God sends Jeremiah back to him to refute his false prophesy and tell him *“what the Lord says concerning you: ‘I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die, because you have preached rebellion against the Lord.’”*

Within 2 months Hananiah is dead and the Babylonian exile continues for three generations.

So where is this leading us? There are many types of prophets, both in the olden days, as witnessed in this story, throughout the ages, and even to today. Which prophets should we believe? And which ones may be sending messages for their own personal gain or the personal gain of those close to them or that simply say what people want to hear? A true prophet works for the good of others. A true prophet speaks truth to power. A true prophet offers actual hope.

Last week, Rev Rob preached on verses 24 through 39 from Matthew chapter 10. The week before that, Rev Deb preached on the opening verses from the same chapter. And today we have the closing verses, the wrap-up. This chapter dives into Jesus' call to discipleship and the cost of discipleship. Jesus, after seeing the crowds that are following him as *"harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd"* tells his disciples that *"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few."* Furthermore, **they** must be the ones to break this labor shortage.

Their time has come: to grow from being simply his disciples, that is his followers, his students, to being his apostles, messengers sent forth to spread his Gospel. He warns them that it won't be easy. There will be many challenges along the way. But he empowers them... to *"proclaim the good news as you go, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near'. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons."* That's all sounding pretty good. But then the other shoe drops...

"I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves"

"...they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues"

"you will be hated by all because of my name"

Then, after a few more warnings, Jesus, in last week's passage, tells his disciples, *"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have **not** come to bring peace, but a sword."* How hard is that to hear? From the Prince of Peace? With that sword, a figurative one so to speak, he cuts them **and us** free from the ties that bind us. But he's talking about those we love. Fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers. Do they tie us down? They can, if they are an impediment to not only being his disciples... following Jesus and placing all our trust in him, but also to becoming his apostles... proclaiming the good news in Jesus Christ.

"whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

And so, on to the big wrap-up this week. Verses 40 to 42. Jesus tells the disciples **and us** that as we proclaim the Good News, as uncomfortable as it may make us feel, and to whatever extent it may drive a wedge into our familial relationships and into our perceived friendships, the rewards for those that hear it and believe will make all the challenges and suffering worthwhile.

So be brave. Be bold. Share the Good News. Preach peace. Speak out against injustice.

Our founding fathers were prophetic in their wisdom declaring independence from England. In those words, *“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”* they set in motion this great experiment we call America.

They knew not where it might all end up, nor do we even still today. Could this group of 56 middle to upper class white men even envision America as it is today?

Could the framers of our Constitution imagine a country as vast, diverse and prosperous as ours, yet burdened still by poverty, discord, inequality, and rancor?

Could they imagine equality and full inclusion for African Americans, for women, for LGBTQ citizens?

It took the prophets’ heirs to get us as far as we have managed to come. Abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison, founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass, and writers such as John Greenleaf Whittier and Harriet Beecher Stowe, and New York Tribune publisher Horace Greeley among many others eventually helped bring the institution of slavery to an end... After more than two centuries of this ungodly injustice!

This past week I heard an interview on NPR with novelist Andrew Sean Greer, whose 2022 novel, *“Less is Lost”* was recently released in paperback. This work follows Greer’s 2017 Pulitzer Prize comic novel, *“Less”*. In these works of fiction, Greer asks and explores, *“What’s it like to be gay (in America)?”* Arthur Less, the protagonist, *“a gay novelist of a certain age,”* as a New York Times book review writes, *“with a handsome face, thinning hair and a roughly equal balance of success and obscurity — goes careering around the country, on the run from heartbreak and headfirst into the undiscovered country of gay middle age.”*

After traveling with our Arthur on his road trip to the many corners of the U.S., seeing how he deals with being *“out”* and how all sorts of folks deal with him, from roadside bars to mountain vistas, from the plains to the oceans, Greer sums up his vision of our country...

[Excerpt] *“America, how’s your marriage? Your 250 year old promise to stay together? I know it wasn’t for love; I know it was for tax reasons. But soon you all found yourselves financially entwined. That split you had, that still stings, doesn’t it? Who betrayed whom in the end? I hear you tried getting sober. That didn’t last, did it? So how’s it going America?”* ... to which Greer responds, *“anyone could say, ‘not well’. How are we going to hang together?”*

The struggles continue. Our founders could not imagine equal rights for women. And yet. More than 100 years after women's suffrage finally became the law through the passage of the 19th amendment, we still haven't ratified the Equal Rights Amendment, passed by Congress in 1972. But thanks to Susan B. Anthony and Gloria Steinem and so many others that have continued to carry this torch.

And thanks to activists like Billie Jean King, Harvey Milk, and so many others, we are finally moving toward more equality for LGBTQ people. And thanks to our modern day prophet, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and our modern day apostles, Rosa Parks, Jesse Jackson, Rev. Al Sharpton, W.E.B Dubose, Thurgood Marshall, Jonathan Daniels and many more who have spoken out against continued injustice and strive for civil rights for all. The Episcopal Church itself is wading into the fray with racial justice, truth telling, reconciliation and reparations taking a primary role throughout our ministries.

Where does that leave everything else? Our challenges with immigration and justice for those seeking a better life, free from danger and persecution still persist. Will we still answer the silent call of Lady Liberty?

*"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

Our native American brothers and sisters, to whom we owe everything we have still languish on marginal land cut through with pipelines. O

ur fragile island earth, which many of us are thinking about daily as we participate in the Climate Challenge is being destroyed by our selfishness, greed, and disregard. Who will speak for them?

Will we listen to the true climate prophets? To those advocating for social justice and continuing the march for civil rights? Or will we listen to the false prophets, like Hananiah, who say everything's going to be okay?

No, I say! We can change the world, if we have faith that God wants his creation protected and **all his people** filled with life, liberty, and happiness. We can't do everything. But each of us can choose a cause dear to our hearts and get involved. So be brave. Be bold. Learn from Jesus, our original social activist. Speak out against injustice. Share the Good News that God's kingdom is here and now, if we just believe and make it so. Preach peace. Love your neighbor.

Then justice will roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!
~Amos 5:24

So how it's going America? That's how.