



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“We Are Called: To Prophetic Community”

1 Kings 17:8-16, Luke 7:11-17

Will Sparks June 5th 2016

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I was an odd child when I think back on it. I mean there are lots of memories I look back on and really wonder. One came to mind this past week when I was thinking about our scriptures and the activity of the prophets Elijah and Jesus. The term "prophet" is a religious term that often makes us think of wild speeches predicting doom in our future, and when I was a kid, I had a prophet in my life.

You see, the first radio I ever had was a crystal radio set. Anybody remember one of these. I must have been about 7 years old when I got my first one. And I build it with copper wire, a diode, and a simple antenna, and with a little earphone, I could listen to, gosh, I could bring in 3 stations! It was amazing to me at the time, and I remember lying in bed late at night, long after my bedtime, with my radio under the covers, listening to late night radio: Herbert W Armstrong and the Prophecies of the world tomorrow.

I had never heard of prophets before but according to Herbert W, it was all about predicting future events. If you read what the prophets said, you can discern what the future will hold. In that childhood world of mine, prophets were fortune tellers and I was fascinated. I told you I was an odd child.

Well a week and a half ago, I walked into Ebenezer Baptist Church on Albany Street in Atlanta Georgia, up the steps and in the back door of the old sanctuary, and there at the front stood the pulpit from which Martin Luther King Jr sent out his message to the community, a message, though future oriented, was not predicting the future but seeing a different future based on the truth about the present and the hope of the gospel. And over the sound system I heard the voice of that other prophet. "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even in the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!"

This is a prophet- A real biblical style prophet who sees clearly the truth of life in the present and sees what is possible fueled by faith and the hope of the gospel.

Which brings me to the two prophets and the two widows from our bible readings today.

They came to call Elijah a prophet not because he could predict the future but because he could see the truth. The poor widow of Zarephath barely had two grains of wheat to rub together, and was at her wits end. Elijah could see her predicament, could see the grinding poverty and promised her that if he had anything to do with it, she would not starve. They came to call Jesus, among other things, a prophet not because he could tell what was going to happen next but because he insisted on telling the truth as he saw it. And the truth about God was that God loved this poor widow who had lost everything. The truth was that the social conditions of this poor woman were desperate and she was not going to be ok without some real material help, and he wasn't about to walk by without offering what he could. That is biblical prophecy- speaking the

truth about the material conditions of life, daring to talk about the real social and political realities that shape life, and then imagining it differently if we chose to live into our calling as gospel people.

I was in Atlanta for the 2016 Festival of Preaching, and the topic was "Prophetic Preaching in times of change." That is, how do we speak the truth and infuse it with the hope of the gospel. I was expecting to hear preachers rail against the gospel according to Donald Trump, but I think the consensus is that he presents a far too easy and unproductive target. He's not an illness. He's a symptom. The harder deeper challenge is to name the truth about what is going on in the heart and mind of a nation that will somehow see Donald Trump as an option. One after another preacher dared to point to an underlying anger and fear in the American psyche. With the rich getting richer and rarer, and the poor getting poorer and more numerous, they spoke of what it feels like to watch the American Dream of "the greatest country on earth" slipping through their fingers. They are afraid that God might be turning divine blessing on others than America, and Trump is a desperate final grasp at greatness that is not to be. Prophetic preaching, it would seem, speaks to truth not at the surface of life but at the heart of it, based on clear thinking about life as it is, infused with the hope of the gospel- life as it might become.

Truth be told, I am proud of this United Church of our's as we turn 91 years old because over and over again we have tried to be prophetic community-living truth and gospel hope. When most of the Christian world refused to give due respect to women in ministry, in 1936 we chose to ordain Lydia Gruchy. 30 years ago, 29 years before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission called the churches who ran Indian Residential schools to a process of reconciliation with First Nations communities, the United Church of Canada apologized to the first peoples of Canada for our racist past which had attempted to take their culture away from them. In 1988 decades before gay marriage was legally normalized in Canada, the United Church of Canada said that gay and lesbian people have full rights and responsibilities as members of the United Church including becoming ministers. Over and over again we have found a way to be honest about life, and to infuse that honesty with the hope of the gospel.

So let's be honest- I'm never going to preach it like a southern Baptist, and you are never going to respond like Ebenezer Baptist church (except maybe Gina and Jamie). That's not who we are. Rather, we are Northwood United Church called to live as prophetic community, to let that same honesty and hope reshape our relationships with the earth, with one another, with our neighbors. Here the gospel gets preached when every child, easy or difficult is loved without judgement. Here the gospel gets preached when the food we have gathered gets offered to Marcel and Andy and anyone else struggling below the poverty line. Here the gospel gets preached when the Board turns down a speculator who wants to give us \$2 million for property but cut down the trees and destroy the Thrift Store. Here the gospel gets preached when all people of every race creed color sexual orientation, gender identity, social or economic status gather around the table of grace and are reminded once again of their blessed place in the household of God. Down south you will hear a voice from the congregation say, "preach it brother." Here you will hear a voice from the pulpit say "live it sister. Live it brother." And as we do we fulfill our divine call to be prophetic community. Amen.