

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

“Ahead of Their Times”

First of Three Messages in a Sermon Series Entitled

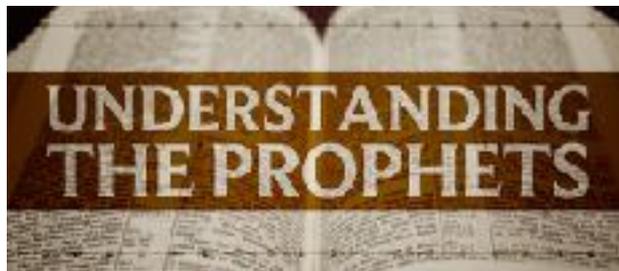
“Our Local Prophets”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

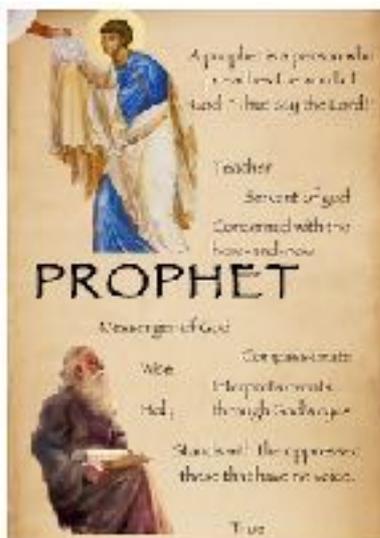
Hebrew Scripture: II Kings 5:1-3, 9-10, 14-15

Christian Scripture: Luke 4:16-19, 24-27

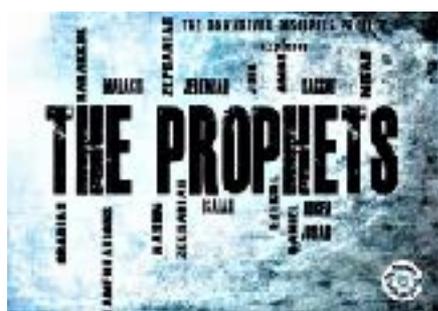
Sunday, 7 July 2019



Moishe, a medieval Jewish astrologer, prophesied that the king's favourite horse would soon die. Sure enough, the horse died a short time later. The king was outraged at the astrologer, certain that his prophecy had brought about the horse's death. He summoned Moishe and commanded him, "Prophet, tell me when you will die!" Moishe realized that the king was planning to kill him immediately no matter what answer he gave, so he had to answer carefully. "I do not know when I will die," he answered finally. "I only know that whenever I die, the king will die three days later."



Friends in Christ, I love this little joke because it communicates a central truth about the prophetic role within the Hebrew and Christian faiths found on the front of your service bulletin: “The prophet is concerned with the here and now”. In this humorous story, Moïse prophesied, but it was *primarily* to reflect upon a very current situation, his possible death at the hands of the king, and the immediate altering of that impeding fortune. In short, a point of the story is that prophesy is *not* necessarily about predicting the future, but rather about *changing the course of current or impending unfortunate events*.



In our sermon series entitled “Our Local Prophets”, we examine at prophets, both ancient and contemporary, who took a stand on a particular issue at a particular time and often paid a price for such a stand. Today is but an introduction, an opportunity to only dip our toes in some vast and deep themes found within the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

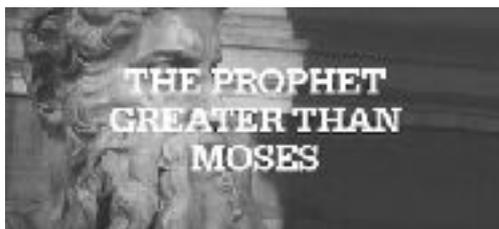


Let us start with the first prophet, Moses (of which ‘Moishe’ is a derivation). As we know, Moses confronted the Egyptian pharaoh who held captive the Hebrews with inadequate food and provisions and then pursued them across the desert as refugees. Moses commanded the famous refrain, “Let my people go!” Yet, Moses, through the giving of the Ten Commandments to his own people provided the quintessential refrain for biblical prophets:

“Thus saith the Lord!”



This refrain, “Thus Saith the Lord”, is simultaneously what makes prophets great and what also gets them killed. The prophets are popular on one hand, they remind us how much God loves us. But on the other hand, the prophets communicate that which God expects of us and that is what often makes them very unpopular!



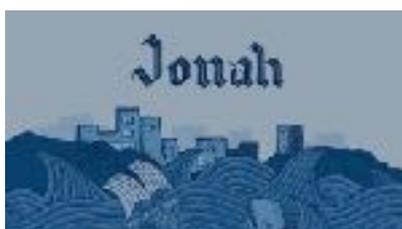
Within the Christian tradition, Jesus is often considered the last prophet. And Jesus was both loved and hated. Jesus reminded people of God’s unconditional love, but he also railed against the practices that prevented the people from experiencing and returning that same love to God and others.



What can we learn from the prophet Elisha, the prophet who followed Elijah? Jesus answers our question. Well, Elisha healed a so-called ‘enemy of God’, a heathen, Naaman, who was a general of an army that fought against the Abrahamic people. This is quite incredible. The story of Naaman’s healing is remembered and recorded because it is gobsmacking.



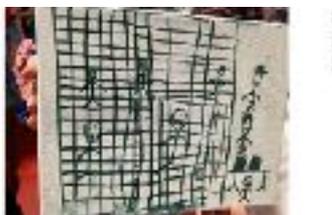
The prophet Elisha declared through his healing of Naaman that God is not a ‘tribal’ god, but the one true God and therefore, ‘universal’. This theme that God is universal is a scandal in every time and place. It offends everyone who is a religious, racial, class and national bigot.



We hear the theme that God is universal many times over. We hear it with Jonah, a prophet who reluctantly went to Nineveh to save the enemy of the so-called 'chosen people of God'. And the same theme continues all throughout our Bible, with Jesus, who preached to his own people, the so-called 'chosen people of God', who rejected it. Jesus preached that God has a preference for those who are what? Poor. Those who are imprisoned. Those who are sick. In other words, all who people who thought they were 'out', were 'in'. And all of those who think they are 'in', have actually made themselves 'out'.

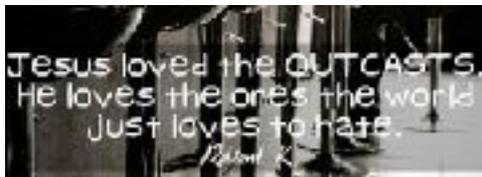


I had a very difficult time celebrating the Fourth of July this year. Why? Because our country that claims "In God We Trust" also cites the constant refrain "God Bless America".





Yet, we are offering little if any welcome, healing and hospitality to those refugees who are desperate to enter ‘our’ kingdom, be it physical or spiritual. So, this Fourth of July holiday, I remember Elisha who healed a *foreign* general, a so-called ‘enemy of God’. I remember Jonah who preached inclusion in God’s realm to the Assyrians. And I remember Jesus who preached and was rejected by his own. Jesus was heard by whom?



Outsiders, the magi, the Roman soldier, the thief, a heathen, a tax collector, a foreigner, and a Syrophenician woman.



Having celebrated the Fourth of July this past week, let us remember as Christians that ‘those who are first will be last and those

who are last will be first'. This is a mantra that gets prophets killed during their time but are *much later* praised to be 'ahead of their time'.



As we celebrate the Fourth of July, let us remember that our sin as a nation is deeply concerning because what we are doing to those on our southern borders we are doing to fellow brothers and sister in Christ. They are our Catholic brothers and sisters in Christ; and in Christ there is no east or west, in him no north or south. For people of the Christian faith, nationalism is perilously close to idolatry.



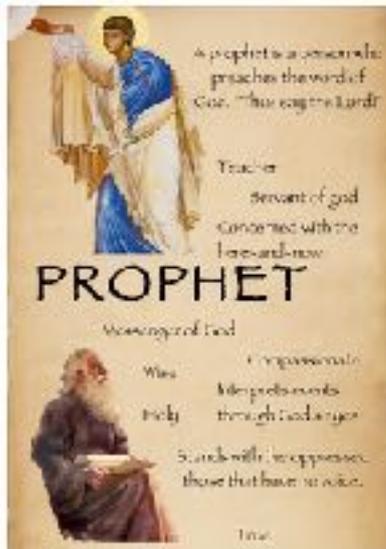
In preparation for our sermon series, I have re-read Dorothy Vander Meullen's history of Centre Congregational Church.¹ Therein, the Reverend Fred Edmonds is quoted speaking to the church saying during his installation service, "Now I realize that there have been several pastors in and out of Centre Church over the past few years. Sometimes I wonder if that has left behind a residue of weariness or discouragement about pastors in general. I hope not. But, if so, we all need to remember that Centre Church has had some very dedicated and committed pastors throughout its long history".

Centre Church's ministerial leadership has been as tumultuous as it has been blessed. Its second minister, McGee, was dismissed. Tyler was apparently a terrible preacher, but no one complained. (It's funny how history repeats itself.) Mighill failed to sufficiently preach on the torments of hell and kept harping on this thing called 'Love'. Martin was forced out. Some thought Day a heretic.

Today, I pause and mention the Reverend Milton Stacy Czatt who pastored the church during much of World War II. "One Sunday he preached a sermon in which he referred to the plight of the Japanese-Americans in this country. Some people voiced objections to the sermon which a member reported to him. Consequently, he decided to

¹ Vander Meullen, Dorothy. "Jewell on Main Street: Centre Congregational Church at 200 years (18-16-2016)", 2016.

resign rather than cause another split. So, eighteen years from the Sunday he had first preached at Centre Church, on December 12 1943, he resigned...”.



In remembering Rev. Czatt, we also remember the second quality of a prophet that you can also find on the cover of your service bulletin. Prophets, more often than not “stand with the oppressed, those that have no voice”, the poor, the oppressed, and those most marginalized by society. Those marginalized may be so due to class, race, sexual preference, or nationality. As we watch the news on our southern border, may we discern God’s will for us and our country. May we declare, as the prophets did, for whom God has a preferential option.



Join with me in the coming weeks as we continue to delve into our church history and learn our about former ministerial leadership about whom we can be very much proud.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.