

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
“Unconvinced by ‘Moses and the Prophets’”
Three of Three Messages in a Sermon Series Entitled
“Our Local Prophets”
The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
Hebrew Scripture: Micah 3:8-12
Christian Scripture: Luke 16:27-31
Sunday, 21 July 2019**



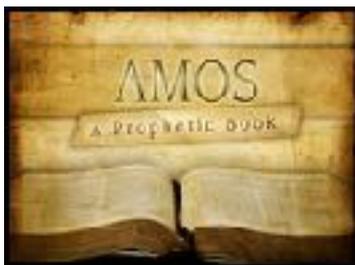
Today, we continue with our third of three sermons in our series entitled “Our Local Prophets” wherein we delve into the ecclesiastical biographies of some of our church’s former ministers. While we examine the legacies of our ministers, we also learn about some of the biblical prophets. Finally, we relate both biblical and local prophets to events we read in the news today to enable our ecclesiastical ancestors to be relevant to our lives.



During our first week, we examined Elisha's healing of Naaman, which we linked to the Reverend Milton Stacy Czatt's stand against the unjust internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.



From these narratives, we concluded that our God is universal, transcends national and racial boundaries, and includes those who we thought were excluded. We related all this to the crisis on our country's southern border and remembered, "The foreigner[s] residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love [them] as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt" (Leviticus 19:34).



During week two, we read Amos and learned that he declared to the nation that a booming economy, wealth, and prosperity were not to be gained at the expense of the poor and certainly not at the expense of morals and ethics. We concluded that the strength of an economy is not a divine measurement of one's faithfulness to God, and certainly not to Jesus.



Through the prophetic leadership of Abraham Lincoln and The Reverend George Tyler, we learned that a nation which builds wealth at the expense, or through the actual oppression, of others, namely Black Africans for over two-hundred and fifty years, will ultimately pay dearly for its sins. The Civil War was a painful accounting for our nation's 'Original Sin' of slavery through racism.



This week, we focus on my son's namesake, the prophet Micah. We also pay tribute to a man I dearly love and whose ministry inspires

my own, the Reverend Allen vander Meulen II. And we bring Micah and Allen's ministry together and relate it to four congresswomen of color who have been denounced for being unpatriotic and encouraged to return to the countries from which they or their ancestors came.



All of the prophets, who by many generations have been viewed to serve faithfully their God and the nation of Israel, criticised and denounced their people, their country. It is actually shocking that any person who adheres to a Christian-Judeo faith tradition can possibly quarrel with anyone for criticizing their own country. The prophets were notorious for condemning and calling to account their own nation. Every one of them were reviled in their own time for crying-out for their nation to reform. In fact, the prophets that praised, served as cheerleaders, and were 'brown-nosers' of the nation's kings and queens were, according to the scriptures, THE 'false prophets'. And most of the prophets, including Jesus, paid a very heavy price for criticising the nation: Elijah (exile), Jeremiah (thrown in a well), Amos (exiled), John the Baptist (beheaded), and Jesus (crucified). All the

prophets criticised their own people: Moses, Micah, Isaiah, Hosea, Ezekiel, and Habakkuk.



Micah demonstrated what can be the quintessential sign of faithfulness to one's God: loving and sometimes harsh criticism of one's one country. Micah states quite clearly that he has major issues with his country - yet in voicing those concerns so vociferously, he actually articulates his *love*, not his *hatred*, of his beloved country. Micah howled, "I am full of strength of justice and power, to denounce his crime to Jacob and his sin to Israel. Listen to this, leaders of Jacob, rulers of Israel, you who make justice hateful and wrest it from its straight course, building Zion in bloodshed and Jerusalem in iniquity" (Micah 3:8-10). You see, the thing about prophets is: because they *loved*, not *hated*, their country, they denounced it when it veered in the wrong direction.



Our last sermon focused on Reverend Tyler. Last week, I did not tell you that he was an abolitionist in Connecticut before he returned to his hometown of Brattleboro to be the minister of our church. While there in Connecticut, over twenty years before the Civil War, he denounced slavery and prophesied the coming catastrophe. Tyler delivered lectures during which “lewd fellows of the baser sort” would engage in “riotous demonstrations” complete with canon fire outside the chapel meant to disrupt the proceedings. Read with me, in your bulletin, what Tyler warned of: “You will be compelled to take one side or the other, for this is simply not a question of Negro-slavery, it is the cause of human rights. The institutions of freedom are in imminent danger from the rapid strides and encroachments of the most vile and wicked despotism the world ever saw.”¹ Our minister did not state this because he hated our country, he stated it precisely because he wished it to live-up to its greatest ideals.

¹ Thomas St. John’s “History of Brattleboro”.
<http://www.geocities.com/seekingthephoenix/a/antislavery.htm>.



I would like to state this morning that The Reverend Allen vander Meulen is one of my heroes. He, like Tyler, is a local prophet who we ought to claim as our own and be proud. In June 1963, Allen and his family moved to Brattleboro, Vermont. Almost as soon as he arrived, he left in August with an All Souls Unitarian Church delegation to hear The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preach his famous “I Have a Dream Speech” on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.



At first, Allen did not speak about his trip to our congregation, for too many were conservative and would not approve. However, in October he preached about his experience, and he did so prophetically! Allen interpreted the United States context in light of the Exodus narrative and concluded: “If the hope of Israel has become the hope of the

Negro, then who is Pharaoh? We are used to reading the Bible picturing ourselves in the role of the good guy; but if the Spiritual [“Go Down Moses”] is right, [then] we are Pharaoh. What does Exodus tell us about ourselves?”²



On the 6th of August 1966, Allen reluctantly attended an anti-war rally two blocks away from the church. No other Christian minister but Allen attended. Allen made sure to attend as a private citizen and did not endorse the views of the rally. A large “combative group [...] was doing everything they could to shout down and heckle the speakers. Eggs and other objects were being thrown”.³ Electrical power was cut to the sound system. In order to simply to facilitate free speech, Allen allowed the cords to be plugged-in to an external outlet at Centre Church. The cord was ripped apart. After being repaired, it was vandalized a second time. A third attempt to restore power resulted in

² Allen vander Meulen III, “Term Paper”, History 645, History of Christianity, 8 November 2008, p. 3.

³ Ellen C. Rose, Letter to the Editor, *The Brattleboro Reformer*, 10 August 1966.

someone (presumably an ‘inside job’) shutting-off the church’s main circuit breaker.⁴



By 1964, some members of Centre church circulated a petition against Allen. They objected to his attendance at Dr. King’s address, his and Dot’s adoption a child of color (Ruth), his presence at the anti-Vietnam rally, and his family’s hosting of a Muslim student from Morocco who was studying at the School for International Training. Allen eventually departed from Centre Congregational Church, relating to the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ that “liberal inclinations and involvements contrasted sharply with the past leadership and with the traditional image of the congregation as a ‘conservative-status church”.



⁴ Anton Kuerti and Joanne Nichols, oral interview. Allen vander Meulen II, prepared remarks “Reflections on My Participation in a Public Discussion of the Vietnam War held in Brattleboro, Vermont on 6 August 1966.”

Friends in Christ, I would like make one final concluding point this morning. Four women of color have recently received a great deal of racist and vitriolic criticism, much as the prophets did, much as Tyler did, much as Lincoln did, much as King did, much as our dear Allen did. The difference between Allen and his detractors was that Allen's primary accountability was to his God and not to his nation-state. Such was the case of the prophets. Allen teaches us that to seek to reform our country is not a nativist justification to goad others to return to an ancestral homeland that they have never known. To critique, even to condemn one's country, for the prophets, for Allen, and for four Congressmen of color is the highest act of patriotism. I do not preach that which is political. I preach that which is biblical. In the Hebrew scriptures, the praise-singers were 'false prophets' and those that were condemned, exiled, or killed, like Jesus, understood that their allegiance was primary to the Most High God and not to a nation-state, a kingdom, a ruler, nor any political party.



May we at Centre Congregational Church listen to our Hebrew prophets, emulate local prophets like Allen, and refuse to condemn our national prophets. For if we do not listen to the prophets, we will not pay any attention to even Jesus, who has risen from the dead (Luke 16:31).

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