

Speaking Prophetically

Alison Wohler, November 9, 2008
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I am so relieved. I took a gamble deciding my sermon topic for today. You could say I was hoping for a particular outcome to the election, the one I felt would BE the true harbinger of change. Last week I wasn't allowed to say that; this week I figure it's OK. Now I believe I can say out loud that we have entered into a new prophetic age, with a new president who will speak out against what is going wrong with our country, but at the same time bring hope and inspiration to our nation, and to its people. With strong and visionary leadership we can rise to a higher occasion.

In his acceptance speech in Chicago, President Elect Barack Obama said [Tonight is] "the answer that led those who've been told for so long by so many to be cynical and fearful and doubtful about what we can achieve, to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward hope of a better day.... We understand the enormity of the task that lies ahead..... Let us summon a new spirit of patriotism, of responsibility, where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves but each other.... I will ask you to join in the work of remaking this nation.... [Our] true strength... comes not from the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from the enduring power of our ideals: democracy, liberty, opportunity and unyielding hope."

Although I may not speak for some individuals, I believe I speak for our country as a whole, and for the world, when I say that it was a great day when Barack Obama was elected President of the United States of America. Despite the many seriously troubling issues facing us as a nation in these times, change is nonetheless in the air. Perhaps we should have our own Inaugural Party on January 20th.

But even as we celebrate and pile our good wishes upon this new President and his new administration, we must be prepared to help him with the immense job ahead. I'm afraid we won't have much time to bask in the glow of this inspiring person's words of hope, as our faltering economy will soon, if it hasn't done so already, bring home to *our* towns and *our* streets and *our* homes the tragedies of someone else's greed.

Forrest Church, in a very recent sermon, wrote "Our next president will face a challenge... greater than we have faced in recent decades. He must rise to the occasion and we must rise with him. If he fails to rise, it is our responsibility to present not a partisan but a patriotic demand that he and the congress put aside their base-pleasing talking points and act on behalf of all the American people, first, by making the hard decisions that will right our economy. And second, by conducting our foreign policy in a way that will make our nation and our allies once again proud of America at its best."

Forrest Church is a prophet too.

What does it mean to be a prophet? What is it to speak with prophetic voice? According to the dictionary (American Heritage Dictionary, third edition, 1994) a prophet “speaks by or as if by divine inspiration,” is a predictor or soothsayer, or is the “chief spokesperson of a movement or cause.”

The words of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible were revered as the words of Yahweh. Their words ring eerily, and depressingly, true thousands of years later. *“Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land! The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing: Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant.”* (Isaiah 5:8-9)

But other verses speak of hope: *“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.”* (Isaiah 42:1-3) Scholars say that this section of Isaiah can be interpreted as speaking of an individual or of an entire nation. He, she, they, we – the mighty and the small – may faithfully bring forth justice.

My message today is about the prophetic voice with which we, in solo voice as well as in choirs and stadium sized crowds can find the strength and have the power to speak. Inspired by a new leader, quiet and humble in his own voice, but magnificent in his actual words, we the people are also called to find our own prophetic voices.

I am impressed by the work of Michael Lerner and how he interprets the stories of his own Hebrew Bible. He writes, in [The Left Hand of God](#): God made a particular point “to Moses in the book of Exodus. Moses had had his early rebellious period, but after escaping from the wrath of Pharaoh, he had built a comfortable life for himself. Living with his wife, children, and sheep in Midian, Moses was in his yuppie phase, divorced from the consciousness of pain that he knew continued to exist in the central cities of Egypt. But, comfortable though he was, there was a fire within him that burned but could not be quenched, and out of what appeared to be a burning bush came the voice of God telling Moses to return to the land of oppression and challenge the power of Pharaoh. Moses’ response was that he was not the right person to do it, that he stuttered, that he really couldn’t provide the leadership that was needed. And God’s response was that even though Moses couldn’t do it by himself, once he had made the commitment, others would be able to make their own contributions, and together they could overthrow the tyrant.”

None of us is alone equipped to do this work. We are only human, full of foibles and quirks and imperfections. But, as Moses was finally able to discern, that there is a point when it becomes necessary to commit that burning part of yourself to the struggle, with whatever talents you have, so that others will follow. Someone has to take the lead. Prophetic voices beget more prophetic voices beget prophetic changes.

James Luther Adams was a Unitarian prophet of our own century. Adams' lifetime quest was that ours become "a faith and a philosophy that 'take time seriously' – neither escaping into a mystical eternity nor an interior 'spirituality,' but shaping personal vocations and 'making history rather than being pushed around by it.'" (The Essential James Luther Adams, George Kimmich Beach, ed., p. 87) "He took Martin Luther's principle, 'the priesthood of all believers,' and radically extended it to 'the prophethood of all believers.'" (p. 105) Adams believed that "you should be a prophet; I should be a prophet. Each of us has an obligation to prophesy, to name what is wrong in our society and call us to love and justice. To criticize the 'powers and principalities' of society and to insist that our own ideas and practices be equally subject to criticism is the radical genius of liberal religion." (John Gibbons, http://www.uubedford.org/sermons/jla_five.htm)

As Unitarian Universalists we conceive of a world and a universe connected by the strands of an infinite web of relationships and interdependent existence. If we also believe in the remotest possibility that the Beloved Community may someday become a reality, that Shalom is within our grasp, then we must take seriously the personal responsibility that is mandated by those two tenets – interdependence and the possibility of a peaceful, just and equitable world. If the web is to sustain itself and continue to be created anew as the universe unfolds, we are called to keep our part of that web clean, sustainable, and overflowing with the justice, equality and compassion of our principles.

This is a huge mandate. It takes great leaders to call people to their best selves to do the challenging and daunting work that must be done. Barack Obama used a word in his acceptance speech that has not been used much lately. He said "I will ask you to join in the work of remaking this nation, the only way it's been done in America for 221 years – block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand....It can't happen without you, without a new spirit of service, a new spirit of sacrifice." That's the word – sacrifice. I believe that bringing this country to true justice and equity for all people, of every delicious variety, is going to demand sacrifice on the part of all of us. It scares me sometimes, honestly, because I believe there are ethical imperatives in our future that will demand considerable sacrifice. Our comfortable lives, as we have known them, may no longer be a possibility if an equitable justice is to be found in this country.

When Obama was criticized for telling a plumber in Ohio that his tax plan might help "spread the wealth around," I did not think that was a terrible thing. I thought "Isn't that what people since the beginning of time have known was the morally correct thing to do. Don't we revere those who take their own possessions and give them to other people who have nothing? Isn't giving your money to help those less fortunate a good thing? I thought it despicable that John McCain would sneeringly use Obama's words in a way he intended would defame Barack Obama, but that actually inferred the McCain thought the obnoxious divide between the rich and the poor in this country is just fine and dandy.

In a recent sermon I spoke about the Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke and how he introduced some significant changes into our then rather strictly Protestant style of worship. In doing my research for that sermon I also read a statement of his that resonated with me during this time of the presidential campaigning. He said, and I

cannot repeat the quote exactly, something to the effect that a politician is someone who does what is necessary to get elected, but a statesman is someone who does what is good for the country as a whole and for future generations. My hope is that President Obama will remain the statesman, the prophet of a new morality in government, that I perceive him to be.

Ironically, or perhaps prophetically, Inauguration Day falls one day after the celebrated birthday of another great American prophet, Martin Luther King, Jr. I see great opportunity in this fortuitous co-incidence.

Prophetic voices have been around since the first someone cried out in protest about the injustice and immorality around him or her. In the Biblical stories some of these cries were recorded. In an article by Dennis Bratcher called "Prophets Today?" he writes, speaking of the Hebrew Bible prophets, "[These men] stood as a counter voice to those who would allow the allure of power, ambition, and self-serving self-righteousness to blind them to the things of God: doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God... They called the people to live in an alternative reality not governed by the rules of power and success... They called the people to abandon the status quo shaped by those who benefited from it." (<http://www.crivoice.org/prophetstoday.html>)

Could any words be more appropriate today?

I don't expect miracles. Everything will not be made perfect in the eight possible years of this Presidency. The voices of protest and change will continue. But maybe, just maybe, we can make some progress this time?

May it be so.