

August 18, 2013

**The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Jeremiah 23:23-29

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

*The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector*

Fifty years ago this month, a young though already well-known preacher stood up on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to speak to a quarter of a million people. There were 17 other speeches that day but none captured the imagination of the crowd gathered or the hearts and hopes of generations to follow like that one in particular.

“Five score years ago,” he said, “a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation.”

That is how Dr Martin Luther King began what is arguably the most famous oration of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check — a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy.*

He called on the people of the United States, all of the people, to take responsibility for making good on the promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all men and women. He spoke out against the hatred that had infected the nation for generations and summoned instead a spirit of acceptance and respect for one another. He preached a challenge and he cried out for change.

In our reading from the Old Testament this morning, God is talking to Jeremiah about prophecy and prophets. We hear a lot about prophets in the Old Testament and we hear a lot from prophets, too, Jeremiah himself being chief among them.

We also hear a lot today about false prophets, those who are trying, through their own claimed gifts, to lure people away from paths of righteousness, away from the path that leads to God. And in our passage this morning and the verses that surround it, God sets out to separate the holy prophets from the deceivers.

Those who have taken Old Testament instruction from me or from Geoffrey know that the best indicator of a true prophet is whether or not the prophet is upholding the current status quo or trying to upturn it.

Are the people fat and happy, exploiting the land and other people, falling away from God and worshipping false idols? A real prophet will certainly preach destruction and devastation. Are the people in exile, starving, unhappy and feeling abandoned? The true prophet will preach milk and honey, peace and the unfailing love of God.

If a prophet has nothing to offer but good news in good times, he is most likely a false prophet. False prophets offered complacency, maintaining structures that perpetuated sickness and poverty and alienation and oppression. Real prophets of God would never let these systems stand unchallenged.

Prophets did preach good news, but as an antidote to whatever nightmare the people found themselves living amidst. The good news offered something to cling to: hope, reassurance of God's love, promise of a better future.

We are not all called to be prophets, thanks be to God.

We are however, all called to stand in two worlds. We are called to have a finger on the pulse of culture, politics and society and an ear upturned to the voice of God. We are in the world, even if temporarily, and while we are in it, we had better make a mighty attempt at making it better. It is often the case that that pulse will thrum louder than the voice. The voice of God can be still and small, a whisper in the storm. But we need to listen.

The prophet's voice helps us listen. The prophet's voice helps us focus and helps us discern God's voice from the cacophony of sound that wants to draw us away. The prophet's voice can help us pick the voice of God out when it has grown so faint in our ears as to almost disappear.

And when we do hear the voice of God over the cacophony, it is our job to follow God's instruction to "Speak my word faithfully..." get out of the way and let God's word come through without our own agendas floating to the surface, muddying the message. It is our job to preach peace when peace is appropriate, and to preach challenge when challenge is needed.

We are not all prophets, thanks be to God, but we all have voices, from the loudest and most boisterous among us to the quietest and shyest. We are not all prophets, but are all able to be witnesses to both the goodness of Gods world and to the change that has to happen in order to sustain that world.

Isaiah and Jeremiah were not the last of the prophets. There have been scores of them since and they still walk our roads today. Prophets are the ones who are tuned to both the pulse of earthly life and the voice of God and they push through their own fear to speak that voice to us who need it.

Prophets are not perfect. They are people, broken and beloved like we all are. They are prone to stumble, they are subject to passions and pitfalls. But they keep speaking a voice of truth, doing their best not to filter the message of God but to offer it truly and as purely as possible.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was one of these prophets among us. He knew when and how to preach the *shalom*, the peace, to a people in a nation that desperately needed a message of hope. He spoke with a voice of influence and he spoke with words that were divinely inspired.

He also spoke truth to authority, not allowing those who were comfortable to remain comfortably blind to the nightmare of racism that surrounded them.

He spoke comfort and challenge, together, looking at a country divided and in need of both, hearing the voice of God and offering it to the comfortable and the afflicted. “I have a dream...” he said, and his prophetic words became everyone’s dream.

The word of the Lord is a fire, it is a hammer. It cannot easily be contained, it breaks barriers in its way. It is terrifying and powerful, raising up, breaking down, getting done what needs to be done, with us or despite us. The world of the Lord is not to be treated lightly, nor is it to be used inappropriately. The word of the Lord is for ushering in justice, for gaining freedom, for ending oppression, degradation, war, misery.

Our reading from Jeremiah is powerful for any of us—all of us—who find ourselves the recipients of God’s word. Will we speak God’s word faithfully to a world that needs both comfort and challenge? Will we pass along this word that can destroy hatred and build up peace?

We are not gifted with prophets like Dr. King very often. Their words, inspired by the word of God, are intended to last for generations, and they do. We continue to be inspired by King and the voices that have rung out before and since. Better put, we **MUST** continue to be inspired by these voices if we will continue to work toward a better future for those who come after us.

We are not all of us prophets, thanks be to God. But we are all children of God. God speaks to us all, in our own time, in our own ways. And while we are not all prophets, we can still respond to that voice, with our actions, our prayers and our own voices. We have the opportunity, as a community and as individuals to continue to respond to the prophetic voices of our time, those who preach love of creation, love of God, love of neighbor. How we respond to the opportunities offered by true prophets is up to us.