

Prophecy & Promise, Crossroads UCC Sermon for Nov. 20, 2016
Steve Rose. Readings from the *Revised Common Lectionary* 2015.

* Note: *italicized* and **boldfaced** words are to indicate emphasis in oral presentation.

Prophecy and Promise: that's largely what today's lectionary is about. Rather fitting, given the recent political events of our state and country. We've obviously seen the power shift on all fronts—the Presidency for sure, but also the national and state legislatures. So we need to pay close attention to the political “prophets” that be and their promises blaring from that shiny building about 15 miles north of here. But God doesn't make promises like a politician does. She's rarely very specific, and She doesn't break Her promises. And sometimes Her promises are not what we want to hear at all. But we can count on them. As Elisabeth Elliot tells us, “God never promised to solve our problems. He has not promised to answer all our questions. ... He has promised to *go with* us.” So what does this companionship look like?

Take God's promise to the Israelites. Jeremiah the prophet, obviously no favorite of the king Jehoiakim, sends his buddy Baruch to the king. The king doesn't like what he hears. So the king pulls out a scribe's knife and shreds the scrolls, then burns them. I don't have a scribe's knife, but this will do. (**Brandish pocketknife and cut up first page of sermon.**)

We'll forgo burning the "scroll," given the fire marshal's rules and all. So why is the king so bent out of shape? Basically, Jeremiah is saying that the current order of things, the status quo with the king as top dog, is going out the window. Let's hear part of that prophecy and promise again:

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them. This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel . . . I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," . . . For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

That's one heck of a promise! Each person will be *responsible* to understand the *meaning* of their salvation--not relying on the priests, who are no doubt in the pocket of the king. Every woman, man and child will know the way to go about life. *What* that exact way *is* Jeremiah doesn't explain, but Jesus certainly did, reducing his practical prophecy to that simple, *easy-to-remember*, **hard-to-practice** Golden Rule—to treat one another as we would wish to be treated. It would be easy enough to go back to the political speeches we've heard over the past few months to show how that advice has been ignored, but I'll pass, for a second. I will say that this promise is more and more important *to act on* as times gets harder.

As David Nichols tells us: "God's promises are like the stars; the darker the night, the more they shine." And we people of faith *are* those

promises. Even as we to oppose some of the agenda of our new President, notably his desire to discredit climate change and oppose *policies* to reduce it, we need to *embrace his followers* as fellow travelers on this beautiful blue planet. I don't know how many of us bought and posted the "Choose Kindness" yard signs Julia provided, but now is *no time* to put them away. It's all the more time to display them prominently. I don't know how many of us thrilled when we heard our brilliant First Lady tell her fellow Democrats to "Go high!" but now is all the more the time to make those words our lives' motto, coupled, of course with the Golden Rule.

And this is not advice for just Democrats. God lives in the hearts of members of both parties, I'd like to think in equal number. Take the Christian anti-abortion folks who used to be such a force in the Republican Party. These folks are motivated by the Golden Rule. They just put their *emphasis* someplace where I do not. If I have to choose between a woman frightened by her own pregnancy, I'm going to choose the woman, not her condition. If I'm going to put my emphasis on caring for the children that are actually *born* on this earth, they get my nod over those not yet among us. I've not seen the anti-abortion activists real busy providing food and comfort to the children already born into poor conditions.

So what about you? How are you going to *go high* and actively love your neighbor *as yourself*? How are you doing that? How could you do it more? **Talk to me. (Repeat the question, field responses & affirm but don't explicate responses.) Thanks!**

One way of helping us be God's emissaries is to take confidence that we are called to be God's agents. As the Gospel of Luke tells us, Jesus” took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”

We got a promise, a very tangible promise, *food and drink*, the stuff of our physical lives, that we are not only *called*, but that we are *loved*. We are not put on this beautiful earth to be Kamikazes in the name of the Lord. We are not called on to sacrifice ourselves for God's sake! We are summoned to *grow ourselves* in the service of God, our fellow humans, and this blue earth. (**Ask if everyone knows what a Kamikaze was and explain if needed.**)

By the way, just because we are not to be Kamikaze's does not mean we can't adopt of the Japanese meaning of the term. *Kamikaze* means "*wind of God*," or "*divine wind*" in Japanese. I would like to think of us as such winds: light and soft and pleasing to our fellow folks on this planet for the most part, but also having the power to push over mountains of injustice if need be. Of course, some of those folks who had me as a teacher might interpret *my* windiness in a very different way!

And as we act on our call from God, we need to remember that, like Jeremiah, we are also prophets. What we say and more importantly *what we do* is the will of God made manifest, made simple, made *concrete*. Now don't expect to get a lot of credit. As Christ reminded us in Matthew: "Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house." Anyone who has ever raised a teenager can testify to that lack of our importance and the valuelessness of our advice on the home front, no matter what other people might think of us in more distant realms. That's all the more reason our prophecy should take the form of *doing*, of *acting*, not *talking*, no matter how much of a divine wind we want to be.

But we can't take on everything, or least each individual among us cannot take on every issue God puts before us. That's why we have different talents, interests, etc. As A.D. Tozer reminds us: "A prophet is one who knows his times and what God is saying to the people of his times." Each of us has a slightly different take on those times. Scripture tells us that each of us has different *talents*. By extension then, each of us has different *tasks*, different *responsibilities*. True, all of us who are adults have the task of caring for our physical selves and our children. But beyond that, we are called to serve in separate ways. A little bit ago I asked you how you expressed your love for your fellow humans. When

you did that you also implied the way you go about serving those folks and our blue planet. (**Allude back to what folks have said.**)

Having recently retired, I'm wrestling with this question. Where do I volunteer my time and how? I'm not sure I've found that calling yet entirely. Do I keep volunteering to help with poetry events, which can make herding cats look simple? I *am* finding that a life-long calling of mine is getting louder and louder, that of being a story teller. Recently I did a presentation for the Iowa Historical Museum about the lives of country schoolteachers in mid-19th century. I was amazed how excited I got about that and how easy it was to get lost in prepping for the gig.

That storytelling adventure was born out of a larger story telling idea, one that my spouse Mary is very much responsible for. What would a historical novel about that Iowa school marm living before the Civil War look like? We brainstormed the idea all the way to Champaign, Illinois, and in the last month or so I've outlined the chapters of the book, sketched out the main characters, and started the first few chapters. I pray this story will help young people understand Iowa pioneer history and the *struggle* a young professional woman would have at that time.

That's maybe the best part. I know I like to create, but never have I felt *more* like I'm creating something to serve a *larger purpose*, to *educate* as much as to entertain. And this is part of that wonderful covenant that God has bound me in. I am to serve, but in serving I find out that I *mean something to the world*.

I also know that the kind of service I just described is a bit narcissistic. I need to serve in a way that more directly impacts the lives of others. The idea of tutoring or substitute teaching doesn't excite me so much. Two days ago I found out what *does*. I was at a Rotary meeting when our guest speaker talked about the role of a *CASA*, that is a *Court Appointed Special Advocate*. These folks serve as a sort of legal Dutch uncle or aunt to kids in the foster care system. They do not provide the homes, but they help the kid access services that she might need. The *CASA* might also communicate with the schools and other organizations that child is involved in, and provide more informal supports in conversation and company. In short a promise made to me and a promise I've made to my God fell in my lap during a luncheon. By the

way, the entrée for the lunch was ham balls, which are a gift of God I've discovered in Iowa.

This month we have lost one of my major spiritual leaders although he would giggle at being labeled as such. Many of you know that the aging troubadour Leonard Cohen passed on a couple of weeks ago at the age of 82. Fewer of you know about his last album, created while he was sitting in an invalid's seat, unable to stand, but still croaking into a microphone. Here is the first verse and refrain to the title song of his last recording *You Want it Darker*.

"Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name
 Vilified, crucified, in the human frame
 A million candles burning for the help that never came
 You want it darker.
 Hineni, hineni
 I'm ready, my Lord."

What does "Hineni" mean? It's Hebrew, and Cohen was an ethnic Jew and Buddhist disciple. It means, "Lord, here I am; send me!" At Death's door, Leonard Cohen was looking for his next great adventure.

I get scared. I see so many people on the planet who hear no call at all. Who do not seem to feel any need to serve anyone or thing beyond their own needs or the needs of their immediate friends and family. They're not marching to a different drummer. They're not getting off the couch, unless it's to type in some virtual hate message. "*Hineni*" to them? Something they sit on.

That's got to feel empty, to feel hollow, to feel only half-there, only half-formed. I get more scared. I see citizens of this nation claiming Christianity as their primary identity, but over-embracing a myopic attachment to family and the folks most like them. I see them rallying around the call for individual liberty of gun ownership while they ignore the human target ranges that cities like Chicago have become. Who are these folks' prophets, and what promises have they embraced? It's not as simple as pointing at one Presidential candidate or one political party—they are listening to their gut, which I remind you, is a good two or three feet away from their brain. I do know we will **not reach them** with our understanding of the Christian promise by trying to **out-shout**

them. So it's up to us to *sing* out, to give melodic voice supporting all God's people and all God's planet. So why don't we? Join me. Turn to hymn # 570 in the *New Century Hymnal* and keep the hymnal open to that song for the benediction.

We shall overcome, we shall overcome,
We shall overcome someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We shall overcome someday.

The Lord will see us through, The Lord will see us through,
The Lord will see us through someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We shall overcome someday.

We're on to victory, We're on to victory,
We're on to victory someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We're on to victory someday.

We'll walk hand in hand, we'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We'll walk hand in hand someday.

BENEDICTION: Let us listen to the simple prophecy we've heard our whole lives—to love our God and our fellows. Let us fulfill that promise with zest and kindness and bravery. And let us finish the hymn.

We are not afraid, we are not afraid,
We are not afraid today;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We are not afraid today.

The truth shall make us free, the truth shall make us free,
The truth shall make us free someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
The truth shall make us free someday.

We shall live in peace, we shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We shall live in peace someday.