

Prophets

Isaiah 9:1-7

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

⁹ ²The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
³You have multiplied exultation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
⁴For the yoke of their burden
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
⁶For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷Great will be his authority,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light! The yoke of their burden has been broken! And all because a child has been born.

A son is given to us. And he shall be named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. And there will be endless peace for the throne of David from this time onward and forevermore! We know the child about whom the prophet sings! Let's shout his name out loud together. This child's name is:

Hezekiah!? Hezekiah!? We seem to have a miscommunication....

Jesus? Where did you get *that* idea? Isaiah lived in the 700s BCE. He was sent by God to the kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, and Ahaz. During the Syro-Ephraimite crisis, Ahaz was

being pressured to join an anti-Assyrian coalition or be sacked. Ahaz felt the walls closing in. Then in walks Isaiah, who says:

The young woman is pregnant and will bear a son, and she shall call his name Immanuel.

A king is born, who will lead God's people through this Syro-Ephraimite crisis. That king's name is Hezekiah.

You're probably thinking of Matthew. Matthew loved Isaiah, too. Matthew put Isaiah's glorious words all over his Jesus story.

This morning, I want us to be reminded of what a prophet is. If we remember what a prophet is and what God does through prophets, we can know that Isaiah was talking about King Hezekiah and we can love Handel's Messiah. Prophets have always been key to God's unfolding story; then and now.

No better place for us to go to get clarity about the prophet's task than Isaiah. This is Marc Chagall's depiction of Isaiah 6, when God calls Isaiah and places a burning coal on his lips. Isaiah's mouth becomes a source of fire and he begins to do what God's prophets do. He warns rulers to be faithful to God. Don't play games or cut corners; don't treat public policy like it's an ego trip; make laws that are righteous and just for the people.

Prophets help us see the future. But they're not prognosticators. They're asking us to trace out the effects of our decisions; too often we're consumed by immediacy and expediency. Leaders will often obscure the future hoping that we won't remember whose fault it was when short-term thinking creates long-term problems. Prophets insist we look out toward a longer time horizon. Injustice is a weed, a poison. If you plant it now, you may not see its effects immediately, but you will see them. And God, who rules in every time, will sometimes forgive the consequences of our misdeeds; and sometimes God allows us to eat the bitter fruit of our transgressions.

Another misconception about prophets is that they are political operatives only. But I really want you to see the prophets as artists. Great prophets have incredible imaginations and they are able to inspire and inflame the imaginations of others.

Look at Isaiah. He's a poet. He turns words into electricity. Isaiah doesn't as much produce predictions as he produces epiphanies—moments of stunning verbal vitality. He's talking about current events in his time, but he sees through the events to reveal something about the human condition.

In our passage this morning, he's writing about the coronation of a new King. But what he's really talking about is the return of hope: "the people who walk in darkness have seen a great light..." This language transcends the particular moment.

Later on, in chapter 11, Isaiah will ask you to imagine a future when swords are made into farm tools. Metal won't ever pierce a body; it will only pierce the ground.

He shows us a wolf and lamb lying down together—natural enemies laying down their enmity. There shall be *no more harm* between creatures on all God's holy mountain.

To be clear, none of these visions “came true” in Isaiah's lifetime. They didn't abolish weapons. No one let their babies play with lions or snakes. But remember, the prophetic task is not so much prediction as description of the world as a moral landscape; insisting that we see not just with our eyes but with a spiritual imagination.

Isaiah inspired generations of prophets after he died. 150 years later, when God's people are living in exile in Babylon, people were still reading Isaiah's poems. So when their captivity was ended, and the exiles are allowed to go home, at that moment, a new prophetic poet steps forward. And knowing the power of the prophetic imagination, knowing that words can make worlds, the Isaiah-inspired poet sings:

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,

The words emerge from the deepest dreams of a people. The present is not all there is. Look to the future--it belongs to God.

Our social imaginations are always constrained by what is “politically expedient” or by what is “good for the market.” The most important power that leaders have is not the sword, but the power to fix the boundaries of what you and I can imagine for this life. When your imagination is constrained, so is your hope.

The prophet-poet wants to set fire to your imagination, to liberate the hopes you have long denied and suppressed. To imagine:

- of the peaceable kingdom,
- swords bent into plowshares.
- a highway in the wilderness, a desert in bloom
- Of the people who sat in darkness seeing a great light.
- And of a God who says “fear not,” “I will be with you.”

The prophets are still here.

In the present moment, if you've been to any of the pro-democracy marches, you'll see so many beautiful creative outpourings... so many beautiful, creative posters. One of them

especially moved me. It says, “The only monarch allowed at our house,” and is covered in images of monarch butterflies. Provoking the social imagination.

I see prophets all over the place...

Bill McKibben wrote his first book about climate change, *The End of Nature*, in 1989. He founded the environmental justice organization 350.org. He’s now running a group called 3rd Act, which is organizing senior adults to use their wisdom and resources to make the world more just. Bill McKibben is relentlessly hopeful about the power of human beings to work together to make a better future for everyone. He insists that the earth is ours; we, the people, should have the authority to determine its future, not corporations. Provoking the social imagination.

Latisha Springer looked around Atlanta during COVID and saw so many people out of work and struggling and she started putting refrigerators outside all over town. People who had food should fill them, she said, and people who needed food should empty them. Latisha was convicted that healthy food should be available to everyone. We have this system that makes it so that the only way you can get food is through for-profit grocery stores, or regulated food pantries, but she thought free food should be a given. Provoking the social imagination.

The final prophet I’d like you to meet is Anne Pauline Murray. Murray was born in 1910 in Baltimore Maryland, but grew up in NC. Murray was a fantastic student who left the segregated South for Hunter College in NYC. Living in Harlem, Murray became friends with Langston Hughes, met W.E.B. DuBois and saw Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway perform at the Apollo Theatre. Murray also struggled with their gender identity, changing their birth name to “Pauli.” They began work for civil rights. In 1940, Murray and a friend were arrested and sent to jail for refusing to move to the back of the bus during an interstate trip from New York to North Carolina. Murray began advocating for legal defense of black people unjustly imprisoned. They earned admission to Howard Law School. While at Howard, Murray wrote a paper whose argument eventually formed the basis for the *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) case. They organized sit-ins in Washington D.C. to desegregate restaurants and urged classmates to go south to fight for civil rights. In 1966, Murray was one of the twelve founders of the National Organization for Women (NOW). In 1977, Murray became the first African American woman in the United States to become an Episcopal priest.

It's hard to conceive that that poor Black trans lawyer priest became the single most influential person in the civil rights struggle of the 20th century. But what should not surprise you is that this prophet, the one who would envision a world in which Black people are afforded their God-given rights, women are afforded their God-given rights, and trans people are afforded their God-given rights, was also a poet. The prophetic imagination is the great gift that Isaiah gave to his and every generation. In Pauli Murray’s words, it sounds like this:

Give me a song of hope
And a world where I can sing it.
Give me a song of faith
And a people to believe in it.
Give me a song of kindness
And a country where I can live it.
Give me a song of hope and love
And a brown girl's heart to hear it.