

O God, there is winter in us and loneliness and darkness that do not go away.
And so we seek you, Word of light to our darkness, Word of peace to our warfare,
Word of love to our fear. Come Lord and grant us your salvation. Amen.

A man who thought he was John the Baptist was disturbing the neighborhood,
so for public safety, he was committed.
He was put in a room with another patient, and immediately began to yell,
“I am John the Baptist! Jesus Christ has sent me!
The other guy looked at him and declared, “I did not!”

It’s all about prophets and prophecies this morning.
We hear from the prophet Isaiah
and we hear from and about the prophet John the Baptist.
The passage from Isaiah is a prophecy about a branch growing out of a stump,
which can be seen as a description of an ideal king
or about a Messiah that is to come.
Unfortunately, this morning’s passage from Chapter 11
doesn’t include the verses from the previous chapter because
the terrors they describe only heighten the beauty of this morning’s reading.
In Chapter 10, we hear ominous prophecies about the Assyrian army
moving through Israel on its way to Jerusalem.
You can almost hear the drums beating in the background – boom, boom, boom –
as the army “...came upon Ayyath, passed by Migron,
left their baggage at Mickmash... bivouacked at Geba.
Ramah is racked with fear, Gibeah of Saul has fled...”
On and on the army marches until the warriors
“shake their fists at the hills of Jerusalem.”
This chapter ends with a description of God as a kind of divine forester,
lopping off tree branches with terrible power,
hewing down the loftiest cedars of Lebanon with an axe.
And then the next thing we read is this lovely account in Chapter 11,
not of branches being trimmed or trees being cut down
but shoots coming out of seemingly dead stumps.
The prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures
didn’t just dwell on judgement and destruction.
They could from time to time offer hopeful messages too!

When we hear the word prophet we might imagine an irascible old man
with untended facial hair, baggy, dirty robes,
who rarely bathed and who lived a long time ago.

But of course, every place and time has its own prophets; people who have a calling to confront their communities with uncomfortable truths about the way things are, especially the unfairness of the way things are.

When we hear prophets speak we may be torn between admiration on the one hand and discomfort on the other, because we are often part of the problem they are describing.

What are the criteria that make someone a prophet?

I'm sure there are lots of definitions,

but my own personal list is that prophets are ruthlessly honest, unflinchingly courageous, and operate without any thought for personal gain.

Given those criteria, 3 contemporary people stand out to me -

Martin Luther King Jr., Greta Thunberg,

the young Swedish girl who is one of the leaders on climate issues, and Liz Cheney.

They all meet the criteria of honesty, courage, and lack of self-promotion.

In fact, prophets aren't just lacking in any hope of personal gain.

Their stands may cause them to lose everything, even their lives.

In the passage from Matthew we meet John the Baptist,

who definitely meets the criteria of honesty, courage, and self-effacement.

John, as you may remember, was born just a few months before Jesus.

Eight days after his birth, take him to the temple for his circumcision ceremony.

There, his father Zechariah predicts that John will be a prophet of the most high and that "he will give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins."

That's a lovely prediction but it is a more accurate picture of Jesus than of John.

John's specialties were not salvation and forgiveness.

John emphasized judgement and wrath and fire.

Instead of shoots coming out of stumps,

John harkens back to Isaiah's words

about trees being cut down and axes being laid at the roots of trees.

There is nothing gentle or even particularly hopeful about John's message.

And look how he describes Jesus – with a winnowing fork in his hand,

separating the good, the wheat, from the bad, the chaff, and then burning the chaff.

There's no mention of forgiveness or mercy or compassion in this picture.

Judgement is the ruling image.

We can imagine John grabbing a winnowing fork

and separating the good from the bad with great conviction and zeal.

No hesitation, no situational ethics, no extenuating circumstances for him.
The world was black and white, people either good or bad,
and he was frustrated that no one saw it as clearly as he did.
He expected, he hoped, that Jesus would be as ruthless a judge
as John thought he needed to be.

So we have all these prophecies layered on top of each other –
Isaiah's about Davidic kings and a Messiah,
Zechariah's about his son John, and John's about the kind of savior Jesus will be.
Looking back on those prophecies we can see that the Davidic kings
did not turn out to be all that Isaiah hoped,
that John was not the son his father described,
and most especially that Jesus was not the savior John imagined.
So prophets are honest, courageous, and lacking in personal gain
but maybe not the most accurate forecasters!

The axes and fire John spoke about had no meaning for Jesus.
He came to make love real.
He came to accept and include everyone and for him to do anything other than that
would have been to go against his nature.
We can't blame John for getting it wrong
because Jesus was unlike anyone who had come before.
And we can't blame John because we have some
of the same harshness and disbelief that he did that God could be so truly gracious.
We can't imagine the vastness of God's love and so we settle for a small God.
We can't imagine the breadth of God's generosity
and so we create a vengeful God.
We can't believe that we are what God delights in most
and so we create a grudging God, happier to condemn than to welcome.

In the book, *Tattoos on the Heart*, written by Gregory Boyle,
a Jesuit priest who ministers to the gangs in Los Angeles,
tells about a women's group at this church.
One day a woman brings in a brochure about the Virgin Mary
and the basic message is – Boy, is Mary mad!
She is not pleased with the state of the world and we are all going to hell.
Before Fr. Boyle can form a rebuttal another woman in the group speaks up,
"I've never been to school. I can't read the Bible.
I certainly can't read that fine brochure you brought to the meeting
but I'll tell you one thing – God is not like that." God is not like that.

Fr. Boyle goes on to quote from a passage from Isaiah where the prophet says,
“Be glad forever and rejoice in what I create...
for I create my people to be a delight.”
“Delighting is what occupies God and God’s hope is that we join in.
That God’s joy may be in us and this joy may be complete.
We just happen to be God’s joy. That takes some getting used to.”