

BODILY PROPHETS

12/23/18 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA
Advent 4 (C): Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

"Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me." These are the words of explanation placed on the lips of Jesus and offered up by the author of Hebrews. This passage gets at the heart of what we've been talking about during this season of Advent. Our sermon series, "the Roots of Change", has taken us through a movement from things that have more of an ethereal feeling to them, with all senses of divinity being completely removed from us—way up, out there—to a down here, very earthy, bodily incarnation of the divine.

Today, on this fourth Sunday of Advent, with the nativity just around the corner, there is even more emphasis on the bodily aspects of the shift. The message—over and over again—is that God is not way up there, somewhere completely separate from us, but right here in our midst...among us and within us. But in order that we might be more aware of that, God sends Godself into this physical realm in the form of Jesus.

So, this morning, through the Gospel reading, we witness two simple women—cousins—greeting each other the same way you and I would greet a loved one, and in their greeting, they acknowledge the divine in their midst as they notice their unborn children—that is Jesus and John the Baptist—leaping for joy in their wombs.

Now, here's where I think we have the tendency to either check out, or to over dramatize what's happening. As long as we say, "well, nothing like that could ever happen to me", then we abdicate ourselves from playing out our role as prophets in the world around us. Yes, it's very unlikely that any of us would experience something like being pregnant with Jesus, or even John the Baptist. But that's not the point of this morning's Gospel passage.

The point is that two women—and remember, women were regarded as little more than property, so this detail makes the story even more poignant—the point is that these two, lowly, everyday women are paying attention. They notice what's going on in and around them. The point is that they become proclaimers of God's Good News because they notice what's going on.

In this sense, as Elizabeth says, "blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb... And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord," she becomes a prophet in her own right! On the other hand, it is equally valid that one point of this story is to set the stage for John the Baptist and Jesus being connected even before birth; and that, even in the womb, Jesus is making known that he has extraordinary abilities—abilities that none of us will ever achieve or, probably, even aspire to.

But, the important part for us to acknowledge is that, these two women are given the role of prophet. There's no angel flying down, tapping them with a magic wand, whispering, "you are now a prophet; go and prophesy." Rather this is an enactment of that ancient passage from Joel: "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions."

God gives us information in many ways. We all have the ability to pay attention, but I think we've learned to discount the voices, the dreams...the prophecy. Every once in a while,

however, God's voice seeps in. My own father shared a recent experience of that. He would never call it information from God, and certainly not prophecy, but he did pay attention to his dream, and his dream was fulfilled.

In his case, it's a very mundane example, but I share it for that very reason; that God calls us to listen in all kinds of ways...some very mundane. So, the night after a friend of his had asked him to take a look at the friend's pick-up truck, my dad had a dream. The other guy had just changed the spark plugs on his outfit (that's what we call it in Montana; not a vehicle, but an "outfit"), but something wasn't working right, and he knew my dad, as a retired mechanic, would probably be able to fix it.

Dad tells me both he and his father, who was also a mechanic, have been a little haunted over the years by their dreams of endless amounts of outfits in need of repair. On this particular night, however, Dad's dream was very specific. He lifted the hood of the outfit and quickly noticed that one of the spark plugs wasn't properly connected.

He paid attention to his dream, and sure enough, the next morning when he opened up the hood of the actual outfit, he quickly identified the unconnected spark plug! God gives us information in many ways. Do we pay attention? Do we proclaim what we've noticed to those around us? And if not, why not?

If I ask you to imagine a prophet, who do you see in your mind's eye? What does a prophet look like to you? I'm guessing for many of us, it's a very sage, wise old man...maybe with a turban on his head, or a long beard. But prophets come in many forms.

Mary and Elizabeth don't need someone to tell them to prophesy; the news is so good, they can't help but shout it out. They literally feel within their bodies what's true about the depth and breadth of God's love, and they lift their voice in that truth. So, Mary declares: "Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

In my experience, being willing to speak God's truth—which is what prophecy is—requires foregoing the worry of being wrong, or of being thought crazy. Being a prophet requires getting out of one's own way. Another unexpected place I've seen prophecy is in children...you know "out of the mouths of babes" and all that.

You may have experienced this with your own children; Nancy, our preschool director, and I can tell you that some of the most theologically profound things we've heard have come out of the mouths of babes. Children seem to have a way of noticing the signs that some of us have become asleep to.

For instance, I was talking about pregnancy with some mothers one day, and at least two of them in the group shared that their first child, who was about four or five at the time, was aware that they were pregnant with the second child, before there were any visible signs of the pregnancy, and before they had made any announcements. In one case, the older child was resting his head on his mother's belly, looking out the window, when he suddenly sat up and said, "I just saw the stork fly by our house." That is prophecy!

God gives us information in many ways. Do we pay attention? And what do we do with the information? Do we share the Good News? Because as indicated in Hebrews this information is not solely for our personal benefit. Jesus declares, "See, God, I have come to do

your will,” calling us to do likewise—to strive to share our gifts and the information that comes through our gifts for God’s will, not ours.

Besides thinking prophets have a perquisite list of qualifications that we don’t have, we also we give ourselves an out by thinking we’re not pure enough, or righteous enough to be a prophet. We hear passages like the one in Hebrews: “it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all,” and rather than realizing this means God’s one action is good for all eternity, we get confused that being sanctified once and for all must not have “taken” in our lives, because we keep doing stuff that seems pretty sinful. We don’t feel “sanctified”.

But that’s the amazing paradox of us becoming the kingdom of God. We are both “tainted” and “entrusted”. I’m borrowing those terms—“tainted” and “entrusted”—from a poem I shared at our recent Advent Retreat. The poem’s called “On the Mystery of the Incarnation” and was written by Denise Levertov. It goes like this:

It's when we face for a moment
 the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
 the taint in our own selves, that awe
 cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:
 not to a flower, not to a dolphin,
 to no innocent form
 but to this creature vainly sure
 it and no other is god-like, God
 (out of compassion for our ugly
 failure to evolve) entrusts,
 as guest, as brother,
 the Word.

Our role as prophet doesn’t get eliminated just because we’re tainted. We’re human. But we’re also God’s beloved, and in that capacity, we are entrusted. We are sinful, yet our job is to serve as the hands, feet...and voice...of God in the world. That was true of Elizabeth and Mary. They were not living perfect lives; they were just getting by, but they paid attention.

Our collect of the day reminds us that we don’t do this work on our own. Just as we are entrusted, we are purified, and just as we prepare a mansion within ourselves for Christ, God makes a daily visitation in our lives to purify us. God gives us information in *many* ways. Are you paying attention? Are you ready to share that Good News?

Collect of the Day:

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
 who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
 one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
 from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time
 when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
 to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
 in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
 to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.

Psalm 80:1-7

- 1
 Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock; *
 shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.
- 2
 In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, *
 stir up your strength and come to help us.
- 3
 Restore us, O God of hosts; *
 show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.
- 4
 O LORD God of hosts, *
 how long will you be angered
 despite the prayers of your people?
- 5
 You have fed them with the bread of tears; *
 you have given them bowls of tears to drink.
- 6
 You have made us the derision of our neighbors, *
 and our enemies laugh us to scorn.
- 7
 Restore us, O God of hosts; *
 show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

Hebrews 10:5-10

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)."

When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Luke 1:39-45(46-55)

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

[And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."]