

Prophets: Real and Fake
Rev. Hannah Petrie
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CALL TO WORSHIP: #418

CHALICE LIGHTING

We inherit this free faith from the brave and gentle By Audette Fulbright
Fulson

This light we kindle
is set in the lamp of our history.
We inherit this free faith
from the brave and gentle, fierce and [prophetic]
hearts and minds that have come before us.
Let us be worthy inheritors of this faith
and through our good works, pass it boldly to a new generation.

PRAYER

Now the Work of Christmas Begins by Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

SERMON

Jesus is purported by the Book of Luke to have said, “No prophet is welcome in his hometown.” It’s one of my favorite sayings attributed to Jesus.

It’s another way of saying that prophets are known for saying deeply unpopular things, or things that are hard to hear, even for the people who nurtured the prophet – for this they garner notoriety that makes such voices powerful and threatening to the establishment. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was such a prophet - toward the end of his life,

MLK said a lot of things about the Vietnam War that drew all kinds of rebuke. But I'll go into more detail about MLK next week, when we honor his life's work for his holiday.

This is one of the more interesting attributes that can make someone a prophet: speaking truth to power so effectively that it makes power twitch, and get nervous. Power of all kinds, such as the power of our elders or other family members. The power of our cultural mores.

Perhaps you can think of some things you've said that were unpopular or unwelcome in your household, things that may be portending. I have maintained to my parents that I think their 14 year old granddaughter, my niece, may turn out to be gay, and they think I'm being judgmental here, as though being gay was a bad thing, as though no one were allowed to be gay in our family. I'm challenging their assumptions about what makes a person successful, and apparently being gay is not on their list. Maybe she's not gay – I could be wrong. But if I'm right, why not welcome the eventuality and be supportive as soon as possible so she knows it's not only okay, but a good thing! If I'm wrong, then the matter is irrelevant, and there's no insult in my standing corrected.

This little story is meant to illustrate that we each have a potential prophet in us – when we follow our gut, or intuit the future, having faith in our wisdom about the bigger picture. Doesn't mean we'll always be right, but the point is, prophets are those who point to the truth of things, and in the words of theologian Walter Brueggemann, "They reframe what is at stake in chaotic times." This is why I read some of the treatise published as a New York Times ad by the Refuse Fascism movement. It is just such an uncomfortable statement that falls squarely in the category of prophetic dialogue – they indeed are reframing what is at stake in chaotic times.

If we are unable or willing "to speak with bravest fire," then I invite us to listen to those who are. Not everyone who signed that statement in the NY Times is a zealot activist like Cornel West or a famous writer like Alice Walker. One of them is scientist Milton Saier, of the University of CA in San Diego. I highly recommend listening to his interview on the Michael Slate show on KPFK – it was this past Friday. Here are some main points I want to highlight that he raised.

As a scientist, he is extremely anxious by the degradation of scientific work that is one of the hallmarks of fascist regimes. Federal funding for scientific work is public funding in service of the truth – that, Saier says, is what scientists do: they have an extremely systematic process for arriving at the truth that allows us as a society to proceed with intelligence and caution in an increasingly imperiled world, especially when it comes to climate science. Rather than fund science, Trump will fund the military, another hallmark of fascism.

I urge you to listen to the interview because Saier was especially eloquent in his defense of the scientific acquisition of truth that arrives at facts and knowledge. It spoke to me as a liberal religious leader, because we have always been defenders of the free search for truth. It's something we have in common with science.

As bold as we religious liberals may purport ourselves to be, the temptation to stick our heads in the sand is great at this time. This new presidency is going to be far worse than we imagine, if current events are any indication. I signed that statement on-line as I personally believe we are at grave risk of supplanting democracy with fascism.

And so we must call out the fake prophets who would have us believe they offer salvation, when they only offer a degradation of our lives and liberty. Look, I'm just going to say it: I do think of Trump as the anti-Christ, and most of his cabinet selections as his demented disciples.

The election is over – it's a free pulpit and I intend to use my prophetic voice in the months and years to come. There will be no pussy-footing around on my part – feel free to tell me what you think about that. I don't expect everyone to agree with me, and I am a non-anxious leader who doesn't take opposing views personally. We must make provisions for a free and safe space for public discourse, particularly in our UU congregations. It would be great, in fact, if we could host such lively debates with high standards of civility. So perhaps in such a debate, I would not use the term, "anti-Christ."

My main message for you this morning is that it behooves us to know the proper criteria for telling the real prophets from the fake. It reminds me of the new imperative we have of teaching our young people how to know real news from fake news, for language is the medium of prophets, both real and fake.

The whole concept of prophecy most historically equates with the Judeo-Christian tradition, which includes Islam. Prophets are those who are anointed by God to deliver a message, and therefore, belong to God. My liberal religious translation is, therefore: finding the courage to use skills such as writing and public speaking, I use my prophetic voice in service of the God who prefers the poor and marginalized, per the exemplars of Jesus and MLK. I say this by virtue of being clear on which god I'm serving. Are you clear on which god you serve? As religious liberals, it behooves us to get clear on our own religious beliefs concerning God, if we wish to use our talents and treasure in prophetic service of a more just and peaceful world.

Let me back up and share more of my own personal reasoning here. Currently, I'm grateful to say, my family has everything we need, and yet – the election of Trump has reminded me that the horror of the great unknown is omnipresent, and I have to live with that. In fact, no matter who became President, the terror of the great unknown would remain omnipresent, for we live in a time of looming uncertainty. Overwhelming as it is, I have come face to face with my greatest vulnerability: I love my family so much, and yet, I know I cannot protect my children from all that may befall them in their lifetimes. What kind of vulnerabilities do you have to live with?

Perhaps they are similar to mine, and can be summed up as the risks of love. There is a type of suffering in that vulnerability when we love, and it is suffering that leads to great

leaps of faith. For many Christians, it is Jesus' suffering that is of most comfort – to imagine Christ's suffering allows people to live with their own.

These kinds of reflections cause me to consider the substance of my faith. Do you have faith? Let me ask again, do you believe in God? Let me explain how I won't take no for an answer. One of our greatest UU theologians is going to help me with this, James Luther Adams, who insisted it's not possible to believe in nothing – we serve gods whether we are aware of it or not, so it's worth examining which gods we want to serve. He says,

“The question concerning faith is not, Shall I be a person of faith? The proper question is, rather, Which faith is mine? Or better, Which faith should be mine? For whether a person craves prestige, wealth, security, or amusement, whether a person lives for country, for science, for God, or for plunder, that person is demonstrating a faith, is showing that she or he puts confidence in something.”

That quotation is, for me, my Hail Mary prayer. It centers me, it asks me unequivocally to define my gods. When was the last time you defined yours? Now may be the time to do it, and whether we call it God is not as important as being able to bring it forth in our lives.

Recently I came across a way of thinking about God that really works for me – it's from modern literature, from a best-selling novel, called *Cutting for Stone*. It drags a little in the middle, but overall, it's a magnificent read. I couldn't begin to explain the synopsis, but it involves two nuns of great faith and explores themes of commitment, both to family and to medicine.

One of the nuns' faith is described like this, that *her job was to make her life beautiful for God*. Whether my beliefs mention God or not, I can still get on board with this notion, that my job is to make my life beautiful for God. It is the *function* of believing in God that I have faith in. If it means that I have to carefully consider what makes my life beautiful, then I am hot to trot for this faith.

What could you say authentically makes your life beautiful? Of course it's many things, but in the context of these uncertain times in which we find ourselves, this knowledge of how fragile life is, how vulnerable we really are, I see that this beauty can be distilled to a few commitments.

Adams emphasized throughout his writings that our beliefs aren't anywhere near as important as our commitments. This is good news for folks who squirm when asked to recite their religious beliefs, because you can say, “well, what's really important to me are my commitments, and these are what they are.” It's a way of claiming that actions speak louder than words, which is essentially what liberal religion has tried to be – to enable us to put stock in the lives we lead, rather than the dogma we profess.

Of course serving the wellbeing of my family is my first commitment, but if I stopped there, what would I be teaching my children? That my faith is limited to serving the God of Fear, that we are put on this earth to look after two things: me and mine. This faith should not be mine, as popular as it is these days. There's an important distinction to make here. The knowledge of vulnerability is not meant to inspire fear. Herein lies the paradox: we embrace our vulnerability to find our courage.

Courage isn't the absence of fear, courage is walking through our fear. It takes courage to move beyond the "me and mine" attitude. But I know God wants me to. To make my life beautiful means to see the vulnerability in everyone, in every living thing. And to understand that I have some responsibility to this world we share. I certainly want my kids to understand this responsibility when they come of age and inherit this ever-fraying world of ours.

Prophets who belong to the loving and inclusive God to whom Jesus and MLK belonged, can come from any walk of life, or occupy any station. There are prophets of state or peasantry. Real prophets point to the Kingdom of God, in word, deed, and action. The Kingdom of God defined as the beloved community, of peace, inclusion, justice, sister and brotherhood, where every child can grow up and be who they want to be, contributing their gifts to the altar of humanity.

Fake prophets and the selling of their goods are rampant – drugs are fake prophets, and sadly our huddled poor have fallen victim to this tragic epidemic. In 2016, 20% more people in America died by drug overdose, than by car accident, an unprecedented stat. But any type of addiction that cuts us off from the holy, anything we think fills the void, but never does in the long run - whatever material items we think are important but really aren't – all such worldly and ego-driven goods are sold by fake prophets – and sadly, such prophets become our gods.

State-wise, fake prophets hawk empty promises, placating the masses while enriching themselves and their friends, creating a kleptocracy. Putin is a fake prophet, exalting his narcissism while ignoring his huddled masses. He is a frightening mentor and bromancer of Trump. We must call out these fake prophets.

Jesus said in the Book of Matthew, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits." I can't think of a more timely aphorism, even though it's thousands of years old. Knowing what these fruits are, we must stop their propagation. And so I hope many of you will join us next Sunday, after the Anti-gun violence group meets, for the Beyond Our Walls event where we will choose priorities in response to, by all indicators, a fascist agenda.

To tie this all together, I'd like to share a portion of the Christmas letter I received this year from my beloved colleague and mentor, retired UU minister John Corrodo. Yes, I know, Christmas is over, and I'm sure many are glad for this. I, for one, can't wait to get

the mess out of my house later this afternoon. But let's remember what African American theologian Howard Thurman says in his litany, "Now the Work of Christmas Begins." Now that it's over, the work is

"...to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart."

And so my colleague wrote me,

"Things aren't terribly different than they were 2100 years ago. They're terribly the same.

There were wars and rumors of wars, violent religious and secular leaders, displaced people desperately seeking safe havens, zealots preying on the fears of the populace, and over all a pervasive pall of anxiety. Bread and circuses distracted the masses.

Grim as those times were, a wonderful, everlasting story came out of them . . . Three men, wiser than most, would not let the times define them. They sought something eternal. They sought hope and its source . . . what they came upon was a young woman holding a newborn baby. It was an **aha!** moment that has resounded down the ages.

If we can be as wise as the three sages," – John Corrodo continues – "we can see that the hope of the world is newborn again and again and again; we can realize that even in the darkest, coldest, most unlikely of places, with all kinds of beastly behavior going on, the holy can occur. We just have to be able and willing to see it."

End of quotation. And though I personally am confident in the gods I serve – for the most part, because I'm not perfect and no one is – as an at-heart humanist, I recognize that, when it comes down to it, I have to find my own way, choose my own commitments of what's most important to serve at this time, and then *honor* those commitments with my time and treasure.

I hope you will join me, but most of all, I hope you will do the hard work of defining your gods and your commitments, then honor them, and at times, honor them in a prophetic manner. Ours is a free faith, but free has never meant easy. Sometimes we shall have to speak down to our own people. The freedom of this free faith we shall hold sacred and lift high, working hard to protect its legacy of fairness and inclusion forever, and forward on down through the ages.

