

January 15, 2017
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "Listening to the Prophets"

John the Baptist was a prophetic voice crying in the wilderness, heralding the coming of the Messiah.

He called the community to repent their sins and turn their lives toward God.

John had been so bold as to tell King Herod that it was inappropriate for him to have relations with his brother's wife, which had caused the woman, Herodias, to hold a grudge against John.

King Herod imprisoned John, but Mark's gospel reports that the King "feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard John he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him."

As the story goes, the daughter of Herodias, whose name was also Herodias, had pleased the king by dancing at one of his parties.

He was enchanted by the young woman and promised to grant her anything she asked.

She consulted with her mother and requested the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

King Herod was troubled by the request, but being a man of his word and not wanting to disappoint the guests at this party, had John beheaded.

John's head was presented on a platter to the young woman at the party.

When truth speaks to power, power most often fights back.

The first response of power is most often diminishment or belittling.

The truth speaker is dismissed as unimportant, irrelevant or unworthy.

When truth persists to speak to power, the result is often violence.

John the Baptist was a truth teller.

King Herod represents power.

John's ministry lasted but a few years, but his story and his truth persist to this day.

He was about the age of 30 when he was killed.

Jesus Christ, Son of God, Messiah, was a truth teller.

He was unafraid of speaking truth to power.

He called on the people of his time to resist the Roman occupation and to place their trust in God who would provide for all of their needs.

Jesus' ministry was about raising up the lowly, noticing the people on the margins, calling out the hypocrisy of the religious leaders who were more concerned with rule-following than loving their neighbors.

Jesus was a teacher with a lesson of compassion.

Jesus was a servant who called others to serve, as equals.

Jesus Christ preached a gospel of fairness and called for building the kingdom of God, described by Paul as a place where "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

For speaking truth to power Jesus Christ was nailed to a cross where he died.

Jesus' ministry spanned a scant three years, but his story, his teachings and his truth persist to this day.

He was about the age of 33 when he was killed.

Martin Luther King, Jr. born 88 years ago today was a truth teller.

Reverend Dr. King spoke truth to power demanding a better world than the one in which he lived.

He boldly dreamed of a time when race would not divide our country.

He led a non-violent movement in the face of violent opposition.

After a ministry of less than 13 years, Martin Luther King was assassinated – a voice cut short at the age of 39.

Three young men.

Three young prophets who changed the world.

Three deaths made possible in a culture where the truth-teller had been demonized by those in power.

King Herod could say that he didn't want to kill John – only Herodias had requested it;

Pilate could say that he didn't want to kill Jesus – but the Jews demanded it;

Bull Connor could say that he didn't want to kill Martin Luther King – James Earl Ray was the one with the gun.

Dr. King reminds us: “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

In an essay this week called “Prophetic Priests, Priestly Prophets” Guy Sayles describes prophets as those who “call us to reflect our relationship with God in our relationships with other people, with culture, and with the systems and structures of society.”

Sayles continues: “The primary locations of a prophet are the streets, city hall, the county courthouse, community centers, media outlets, creative studios where art and music are made, and board rooms. Prophets show up anywhere decisions are made or opinions are shaped that affect the common good. Prophets spend a great deal of time in discernment and analysis; and, when they speak, they mainly question *what is* and describe *what could and should be.*”

This question of what we should be intrigues me.

What if John the Baptist, Jesus the Messiah and Martin Luther King had lived out their lives?

Do we hear the words of the prophets when they simply exist among us or does it take tragedy to draw attention to their message?

Would we have gotten to where we are without their voice?

What if John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus had had the opportunity to work together for 25 years to bring the message of repentance and salvation to the people?

I wonder if the world would be different.

What if Jesus had had the opportunity to record his impressions or codify his teachings?

I think the church would be a different place.

If Martin Luther King had lived out his 88 years, perhaps he would have been our first African American president.

Of course, this ruminating changes nothing.

The truth is that all three men were killed for speaking truth to power and we are left to carry on their legacies.

We honor John the Baptist by repenting of our sins and honoring our baptism with our lives.

Christ continues to call us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

The spirit of Martin Luther King lives on in us as we remember that ‘Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.

Our lives, Dr. King tells us, ‘begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.’

Sayles' essay concludes with these beautiful words:

'Prophets trust, and invite others to trust, that God is bringing order out of chaos, peace out of conflict, and hope out of despair. They rest in the awareness, and invite others to rest in it, that God is lifting-up love amid the ruins of fear and raising-up life from the shadows of death. They challenge themselves, and they challenge others, to join God in that saving work.'

My friends, the prophets have spoken to us.

They are the messengers of God's word and God's will.

It is important that we listen and respond to their message.

Let the psalmist's words ring true in your heart:

'Here I am; I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.'