

February 28, 2016
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "Prophets and Patience"

On Monday this past week Nicole Corrieri, a young Muslim woman who is working on a Master's degree in Islamic Studies, led our worship service at Hartford Seminary.

Nicole's sermon was entitled "A Shared History: The Heritage of the Prophets."

She eloquently described the intersection between the Jewish Torah, the Islamic Qu'ran and the Christian Bible, all which include the words of prophets-messengers sent from God.

All of the Abrahamic religions, those that trace their ancestry to Abraham, have depended on prophets for insight and understanding.

Prophets are poets, really, people who are in touch with the divine.

This might explain why they are such great theologians.

Today's reading from the prophet-poet Isaiah offers us in nine short verses what could be described as the heart of the biblical message: God loves us, no matter what, and reaches out to us even (or especially) in the worst of times, making promises that are eternal.

These are not just pie-in-the-sky or theoretical promises – they are the very foundation of our faith.

One author characterized God's promises as addressing the things that we most yearn for, deep down in our hearts, the very basics of life:

homecoming when we're lost or far away,

a rich feast when we're hungry,

flowing fresh water to satisfy our thirst,

and a community of hope when we long for meaning in our lives –

something greater than ourselves, in which and through which we might be a blessing to the whole world.

Today's passage from Isaiah has been referred to as the 'Book of Comfort.'

His words are addressed to the Jewish people in exile in Babylon almost six hundred years before Jesus.

We love the prophets because they know how to speak sternly to the people when necessary, but they also know how to speak tenderly, to convey God's great love and mercy.

Isaiah knows that the people are hungry for a message of hope, a message that promises an end to their captivity and a different way of life, back home, where they can be who they are called to be, and live lives faithful to the God who has made an everlasting covenant with them.

I doubt there has ever been a time in history when people did not yearn for some words of comfort.

We yearn to know that no matter how crazy the world might seem, God is present. God will be with us.

Prophets bring hope in times of despair; promise when people feel helpless.

A prophet's message is timeless.

Isaiah wants his people, us, to recognize that we have possibly settled too comfortably into a routine and worldview that keeps us busy and distracted from God.

He is worried that we've lost touch with our deepest selves.

He fears that we have forgotten that we are made in the image of God.

Isaiah is concerned that our spirits may be thirsty, starving, and homesick, even if we can't (or won't) name those feelings on our own.

The prophet assures the people that God, who is greater than any human, has the capacity to forgive even the greatest transgressions.

God has the ability to make all things new.

Trusting in the mystery of God, in the power of God, Isaiah assures us will bring new life.

Jesus reiterates this theme in today's message to his followers in what seems to be two lessons.

First he assures them that bad things happen in life and there is little control over that.

The key here, though, is that, whether we are "good" or "bad" we all need to repent.

We all need to turn from the ways of this world's system: the grasping for power, wealth, and pleasure.

We must embrace the ways of God's kingdom: justice, simplicity, generosity, grace, love, servanthood and peace.

Then, as we begin to live according to the values of God's kingdom, we will be able to face whatever comes – good or bad – with the strength and grace of Jesus, and we will bear the fruit of bringing life to those around us.

Jesus proclaims that the victims of accidents and tragedies are no less God's children than you and I.

This past week I shared dinner with my brothers and sisters in Bridgeport whose lives are certainly less privileged than mine.

It would be sinful to regard their lives as having less value than mine or to forget that they too were each made in the image of God.

Our thoughts, our actions must always be in the context of God's presence.

Each encounter with another person is an encounter with the divine.

We have committed ourselves, as Christians, to this way of life.

We have taken a stand and said 'this is what I believe.'

We get up on Sunday morning and bring ourselves into this community declaring that we yearn to be part of God's kingdom.

Whether that kingdom is right here, right now or at the end of time – by virtue of being here we submit ourselves to God's rule.

Jesus' parable this morning is multi layered.

First, the message is that we must not judge the worth of something by a first impression.

While the fig tree may look tired and weary, it may well contain new life.

Second, tender care is required to nurture and nourish what has been planted.

Third, patience is necessary for reaching full potential.

Patience, waiting, trusting that something will happen are all part of the gospel message.

We wait, in hope, for redemption, for restoration.

Jesus is clear, however, that while we wait for the fruit, there is work to be done.

Lent is the time for much of that work.

In Lent we take stock of ourselves.

We examine our lives and we make adjustments where they are needed.

If there is someone who needs forgiveness, it is up to us to forgive.

Earlier this week, in a conversation about reconciliation someone observed "it is easier to forgive than to ask forgiveness."

Is that true for you.

Is it easier to offer forgiveness to someone who has wronged you or hurt you than to seek forgiveness from someone you might have hurt?

The prophets come to tell us what is wrong with the world and to challenge us to take responsibility for our part in that.

But we are individually responsible for ourselves.

Part of belonging to a community is accountability to one another.

We pray our prayer of confession together to acknowledge that we each have a role in the brokenness of God's world.

But it is only in solitude, only with personal insight, that we can claim and name our own sins.

The prophets can give us direction, but we must follow the path ourselves.

I go back to Isaiah's report of God's promises: homecoming when we're lost or far away, a rich feast when we're hungry, flowing fresh water to satisfy our thirst, and a community of hope when we long for meaning in our lives – something greater than ourselves, in which and through which we might be a blessing to the whole world.

Things may not seem so great sometimes, but the glorious promise of our loving God is that the possibility for redemption, restoration, and new life is eternal.

If we nurture the tender plant that is our own soul, if we shower it with love and grace, it will flourish.