



# “The Gift of Prophecy”

a sermon by

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I want to place beside each other two very different texts from the Bible that point to two very different views of reality. The first is from Ecclesiastes chapter 1.

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.  
What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?  
The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north;  
Round and round goes the wind,  
And on its circuits the wind returns.  
All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full;  
To the place where the streams flow,  
There they continue to flow.  
All things are wearisome; more than one can express;  
The eye is not satisfied with hearing, or the ear filled with hearing.  
What has been will be, and what has been done is what will be done;  
There is nothing new under the sun.  
The people of long ago are not remembered,  
Nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come  
By those who come after them.

Contrast the weariness of this passage from Ecclesiastes with the fervor and hope of the passage from Joel that Peter recites in this passage from Acts:

In the last days, it will be, God declares,  
That I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh,  
And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
And your young men shall see visions,  
And your old men shall dream dreams.  
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
In those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
And they shall prophesy.

Now I ask you and myself, to which of these passages do you more strongly relate? It's meant to be a difficult question, like those frustrating ones on standardized tests where you either have to agree or disagree and where you really find yourself is somewhere in the middle. Weariness, skepticism or newness of life and hope, disappointment or dreaming dreams, having a vision that so pervades your consciousness you can't help but prophesy about it?

The passage from Ecclesiastes is infected with a numbness to life; life is without purpose or meaning. A literal translation of the Hebrew word vanity is "vapor" or "breath." This is not breath as in breath of God, as in Holy Spirit, as in Pentecostal fire and power that fills the soul. This breath as in vapor, disappearing, dissolving, fleeting, leaving empty. "Life happens" might be our current expression. Life happens but there is no direction to it; it is old and predictable. There is no ongoing story, for there is no memory of what has come before. Round and round goes the wind. Round and round and round. Some attribute the words of Ecclesiastes to

Solomon although it was probably written later after the exile; in any case it is clear that the words were written in a culture of affluence, by an individual who was satiated by the material abundance around him, as we read in chapter 2: “I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem ... Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 2:4-11)

Nobody is dreaming dreams, nobody has vision; there can't be vision because vision implies something new, unexpected, a different sort of reality. But the Teacher, Quohelth, does not see the possibility of another type of reality. Life is vanity, vapor. Round and round goes the wind.

The wind does something different on the day of Pentecost. It comes from somewhere, it descends, it touches, it inspires, and it grants the gift of prophesy, vision, and dreams. It descends upon a group of humble disciples who have spent the last 40 days in an upper room, waiting for the promises of God to be fulfilled. This waiting, however, was not a time of dormancy, of anxious wringing of hands, of complaining about the stuffiness of the room or the quality of the food. The waiting was a time of preparation to receive the promised Spirit of God in God's time. It is written that the disciples spent the time “constantly devoting themselves to prayer with, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.” Peter led this band of disciples in considering questions of leadership as he addressed the void left by Judas's suicide, and they elected another disciple. They were preparing – we might call it being intentionally involved in spiritual formation, tilling and fertilizing the soil so that when the Holy Spirit came upon them, their spirits would be open to receive it. They waited in expectation of something new, for they had been transformed by the experience of the resurrected Christ of Easter, an experience that could only be fully grasped by going through the horror of the crucifixion.

Again, I ask you, where do you see yourself: in the upper room with those disciples convinced that there is something new and different to be know and experience, or by the side of the weary Quohelth, satiated but not full, as in the feeling you get when you gorge on one of everything from the buffet and end up feeling sick and exhausted?

After the rush of the wind which filled the house on the day of Pentecost, after the tongues of fire rested on each of the disciples, after they spoke in many diverse languages and yet heard and understood them all, the skeptics arrived. This experience was not easily understood – it was something new and revelatory and the question was asked, “What does it mean?” But to the skeptics, there was nothing new – there was an easy logical explanation to be had – the disciples were filled with new wine. See, there is nothing new under the sun, except perhaps the wine that overcame them. The skeptics' sneering comment opened the door for Peter to take the floor and preach, calling upon the powerful words of Joel to give meaning to

what had just occurred – “I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams.” Did you catch that? Your sons and daughters shall prophesy and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams.” I believe he is talking about us. Not them, but us. Not just the old people, not just the young people, not just the women, or just the men, not just the rich, not just the poor, not just the people of the first century – us, all of us.

Again, I ask you and myself now – can we see ourselves prophesizing, having visions, dreaming new dreams? Or do we come to worship just to consume something else without ever really expecting it to completely transform our vision of reality. What is it to prophesize anyway? If you are like me when you think of prophets, you may get images of individuals eating locusts in the wilderness, or men with wild hair and poor hygiene running around with doomsday messages. You may think of Isaiah or Jeremiah or Amos who clashed with kings and whose life was lived out of bounds, away from family and community. Or you may remember with awe and respect individuals who played a momentous role in history like Martin Luther King, Jr. You may think a prophet must foretell the future in concrete ways, as if she or he could see in a magic ball. And if these are the images that cross your mind, then you like me, may think, “What does the gift of prophecy have to do with me?” The passage from 1 Corinthians that we read this morning lists a lot of other gifts – teaching, gifts of healing, forms of leadership – those seem a lot more realistic to embrace. Prophecy is a scary word, fraught with mystery and an assumption of knowing God’s will. How can we actually claim that gift?

Walter Brueggeman in his book *The Prophetic Imagination* writes: the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, he suggests that:

... the dominant culture, now and in every time, is grossly uncritical, cannot tolerate serious and fundamental criticism, and will go to great lengths to stop it. Conversely, the dominant culture is a wearied culture, nearly unable to be seriously energized to new promises from God.<sup>2</sup>

This wearied dominant culture becomes numb, and seeks to be numb to suffering and ultimately to the reality of death, for death relativizes everything; whereas the dominant culture usually is based on satiating the privileged who have special status. Affluence numbs us. Affluence is based on consumption, and consumption is based on a view of the world that is utilitarian – that is, society and culture are there to serve us, and is failing and lacking when we cannot get what we materially want – not need, but want. Ironically, when we can get whatever we want, and seek to get whatever we want, we eventually become like the writer of Ecclesiastes who is empty and lacking a sense of anything new. Our spirits are not prepared to recognize anything new.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Minneapolis, The Fortress Press, 2001, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

The prophetic voice is the voice that points to an alternative to the dominant culture. The prophetic voice comes from one who is perhaps within the culture but not dominated by the culture. The prophetic voice often comes from the margins of society, for these are the places where the dominant culture brings about oppression, not satiation. Ironically, though, those who seek most to benefit materially from the dominant culture are also oppressed by it. However, their numbness is now soul-robbing; it keeps them from knowing their oppression. They must somehow be touched and convicted of the reality of something new, in order to become prophetic voices.

I am not talking about political activism here, although certainly there are those whose gift of prophecy leads to political activism. I am talking about how the gift of prophecy is a gift that can be embraced by us all when we are seized and convicted by the promises of God. Brueggeman points out that a sub-community which is able to generate a prophetic vision is in touch with the following things:

First, memory – a memory that is rooted in the story of God’s purposeful, liberating, saving grace in the life of God’s people. Note how that contrasts with the assertion of Qohelet who bleakly writes: “The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.”

Second, this community is in touch with an “available, expressed sense of pain that is owned and recited as a real social fact.” In other words, prophetic vision does not come from a place of numbness, but from the capacity to feel on behalf of another.

And third, this community is in touch with “an active practice of hope” based on the promises of God and a vision of the Kingdom of God.

Let us talk about memory and remembrance, pain, and hope – that is, the memory of where and how God’s story intersects our story and how this intersection results in a prophetic vision of an alternative community. I want to remember with you four members of our congregation who have died in the past week and remark on how I believe that the gift of prophecy was lived out in their lives. Perhaps these examples will empower us to understand how the rush of the Pentecostal wind can and does transform our vision of reality and influence us to live differently. Each of these individuals was as imperfect as you or me, and yet each of them was informed by a vision, rooted in their faith and conviction in Jesus Christ, of an alternative community to our dominant culture.

At the funeral for Jinx Wells, a member of this community of faith for 57 years, her son stood up and said, “I never heard her say an unkind word about anybody in her entire life.” Now can this quality be equated with prophecy? I believe it can if it represents a person’s vision in contrast to our dominant culture of how we treat others in this world. You try never saying an unkind word about anybody. And note, one can say a critical word, which is sometimes needed, without saying an unkind word. I can tell you that unfortunately my children probably won’t be

saying that about me. Anyone who knew Jinx knew her smile and felt her love, but for a person to have the strength to never say an unkind word about anyone – that person must have a different alternative, different vision of reality given through the Spirit of Christ. Jinx lived counter to our culture, which is dominated at times by pettiness and rudeness in the interest of self. Her kindness was rooted in her knowledge of her identity in Christ Jesus, an identity that sought to strengthen and build up the body of Christ.

Miriam Reid, a member of this community of faith for 47 years, was a teacher of second graders. The morning of her funeral we had a call from one of her students who told us about Miriam's relationship with her and her sister. Growing up, the sisters were poor and had no money or provision for lunch. Everyday Miriam bought the two sisters their lunch. She so influenced one of the sisters that this sister credits becoming a teacher to the impact of Miriam. Will we not all sit at table in the Kingdom of God and share a meal? Miriam must have had a vision of this kingdom of God that informed her concern for these girls and others; a place where no one is hungry and all are filled. She acted prophetically in that she instilled hope in two little girls who struggled for food.

Warren Burgess, a member of this community for 29 years, had a prophetic vision of what community should be, and he imparted this vision through his plans for our city and through how he chose to live his life of faith. His plans sought to create spaces for people to actually live and interact together, rather than isolated behind walls. To inform these plans he actually went out and made friends with the people – all kinds of people, not rich or poor, or white or black, or certain kinds of people, but all kinds of people. He designed bridges, literally and figuratively, and in living out his faith when he was in Davidson, joined an African-American church there, rather than the dominant white churches. He, too, had a vision of the kingdom, and his love of people was informed by his faith in the hope and promise of Jesus Christ. His vision was counter to a culture that seeks to segregate, develop under the influence of greed and more, more, more, and create isolated cells of safety.

Joyce Neely, a life-long Presbyterian, just re-joined our congregation last year, after being in Blowing Rock for some years. Joyce has lived the last 10 years in pain, struggling with various illnesses, unable to leave her home much. Her last time here was two weeks ago when she and her husband Henry came to our special communion service. Joyce did not live in bitterness for her health, although she certainly had reason to. She lived in hope, a hope that transcended her physical condition, a hope fed by her deep wells of faith and trust in God. Now when you know and see someone who lives in such a way, do they not have a prophetic voice in your life? They counter our deepest fears of illness and death with a joy that transcends what our material world and material bodies have to offer. Joyce lived prophetically into her illness, informed by a vision that runs counter to our health-focused culture.

I offer these four examples of prophecy as way to remind us that whenever we truly live out of our faith in a culture that lifts up a self-serving, materialistic vision of what reality should be, then we prophesy. This prophecy is rooted in our knowledge of our Judeo-Christian story and in our remembrance of the witnesses of those who came before us. This prophecy is

informed by our experiences of pain and suffering and by our compassion – that is having passion with – those who suffer around us. This prophecy is informed by our ability – our choice – to have hope in the promises of God, and our imaginative power to vision God’s kingdom, even in this world. This prophesy is not some remote gift only granted to the chosen few – it is a gift accessible to us, every day, in every place, at all times in our lives. And it is a choice we need to intentionally make, even every day; for our culture constantly seduces us to follow the way of the Teacher of Ecclesiastes. In closing, we remember the word of Peter, who said, “The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him,” and in remembering these words, live prophetically into them. Amen.