
Prophets of The Light

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4 Epiphany Year B
Episcopal Church at Yale
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Prophets of the Light

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20; 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13; Mark 1: 21-28

REFLECTION

Welcome! Here in Bridgeport, it's 12° outside, the creek is frozen, and blustery winds scour the snowy landscape. It's the deep freeze of winter. In this season, there's a particular light that I love – weak, warm, with just a hint of promise, it's the light of mid-winter; the light that guides us through Epiphany, our liturgical season of light. I love the way this light grows a little stronger each day, imperceptibly, and pregnant with the possibility of spring, and the promise of resurrection.

Whether we're creeping along at a winter's pace, or wandering in the wilderness – or both – we need that light, however faint, to illuminate who we are, whose we are, why we're here, why we dare to wake up each day, especially those days when we can do little more than simply put one foot in front of another.

We need that light to remind us of the rest of the Body of Christ beyond these virtual walls, to make manifest the lives of all our sisters and brothers—LGBTQ+ youth, DACA recipients, young Black men in prison, immigrants at the border, so many who live on the margins of our supposed land of plenty. That light shines on all their faces as well, and on each of their stories, connecting them with each one of our stories.

We come home to each other tonight as a community of diaspora.

Why don't you switch to Gallery View for just a moment while I ask you some questions?

How many of you have decided, after an exhausting and unsatisfying semester, to take a break, to discover other parts of yourself, other ways to travel through this strange time? Raise your hands.

How many of you have returned to campus to quarantine in residential colleges with connections limited to your suitemates? Raise your hands.

How many of you have taken apartments, barred from the rest of campus? Raise your hands.

How many of you will still be living in your family home this semester?

All of us mourn the loss of the college experience we dreamed of as children, yet like moths to light, we come home to each other, even as we're dispersed around the globe, and we gather in hope.

We've endured. And each of us has discovered deep wells of resilience we never knew we had. And the winter light of Epiphany, however dim, is beginning to reveal sign after sign of hope.

While none of us can afford any more the luxuries of innocence or naïveté, little by little, a path is opening, inviting us to embrace a cautious optimism, even a hope, in those words of encouragement we dare speak to all of God's beloved who struggle, "It gets better..."

Winter does turn into spring, and spring into summer, Good Friday does become Easter, and sometimes the simple gift of time itself is our greatest ally as we stumble forward.

So, welcome back to this community of extravagant welcome, of unconditional love for you, each and every one of you, and love for each member of your human family around the world. Welcome to your community of committed companionship. Know that we have your back at every turn, so that together, we can dare to step into that light.

And now, as we prepare to worship God and heal our souls in the process, let's just breathe for a moment, and let the light of love – God's for us, and ours for each other – wash over us, as we begin again a new chapter in this grand adventure we call life – together...

Now, staying muted, let's join together in our Opening Hymn, Thou whose almighty word.

SERMON

A lot of us were anticipating, with uncharacteristic exhaustion, the break you've just returned from. A semester of virtual classes that students found relentless, near impossible to catch up on, with requirements they were still fulfilling long after the "official" extended break began. Inexorably, the magic day of finishing up every exam, every paper finally arrived. And then, just when you thought you could go to bed for a week... all hell broke loose.

Following the wholesale sense of relief many of us felt at the end of the Presidential election, hysteria, conspiracy theories, and violence broke out across the country, and in the halls of Congress itself, focused on the "big lie" that the election had been stolen. In the end, the U. S. Capitol itself, in session, was attacked for the first time in over two centuries, this time by insurrectionists. While one President was being impeached for a second time, another was being sworn in under a virtual lockdown of our nation's capitol.

All the while, the COVID death toll marched on, unemployment soared, white supremacy was proclaimed, and the assault on our climate persisted, all with a disproportionate impact on people of color. Having endured so many false prophets as a people, where, we wonder, will we find our modern prophets to speak out, and guide us through this time of chaos and conflict?

In today's Hebrew scripture, an aging Moses is leading his people through the wilderness, and anticipating the same kind of transition of power and authority. As God prepares to appoint a new prophet to lead the people into the Promised Land, Moses assures them, "The Lord your

God says, 'I will raise up for you... a prophet from among your own people... I will put my words into the mouth of the prophet.'"

We yearn for modern day prophets to speak the language of our hearts, echoing Jesus' naming and casting out of our baser spirits, and calling us to follow him, equipped only with the words of his new commandment, "... love your neighbor as yourself?"

Well, on a cold Washington morning just 11 days ago, one unlikely prophet showed up in the flesh, a prophet, as she put it from
"...a country and a time
Where a skinny Black girl
descended from slaves and raised by a single mother
can dream of becoming president
only to find herself reciting for one..."

Like prophets of old, Amanda Norman's words, spoken with a hip-hop cadence, bit and chafed, calling us to repent our collective silence, our distraction, our collusion with the reality that
"... the norms of what just is
Isn't always just-ice..."

"... we've seen a force..." she went on,
"... that would shatter our nation
rather than share it..."

"... this is the era of just redemption
we feared at its inception..."

And like every prophet of old, our 22 year old poet laureate promised hope if only we repent and return to God's deepest dream of shalom...

"... and so we lift our gaze
to not to what stands between us
but to what stands before us...
we lay down our arms
so we can reach out our arms
to one another..."

As I took these words into my heart, I heard other words, this time from my wife Cherise, who works each day with children as a pediatrician. "These days," she tells me, "... I look into the real face of the pandemic, the unbelievable number of children who have attempted suicide, or have eating disorders, or who arrive with broken bones from family abuse. This is the pandemic so few see. We desperately need volunteers to support these kids, kids with such promise, yet the pandemic keeps them isolated from the loving support they need..."

My beloveds, as we return to a new semester, it's tempting to turn inward on ourselves, or perhaps into our small circle of permitted social contacts. It's tempting to adopt a posture of "just getting through it" until things get better. It can be downright annoying to be reminded that as Christians, our gaze is always outward; irritating to be invited into being prophets, even one of the least of the lesser ones.

But God brings us here tonight for a purpose. Our latest poet laureate prophet reminds us with extraordinary eloquence, that the path of prophecy is not an obligation, but a liberation, an opportunity to move outside of ourselves into the slipstream of history, a chance to experience the deepest joy imaginable, by helping God give flesh to God's dream. She describes this hope, this promise, far better than I ever could:

"... with every breath from my bronze-pounded chest,
we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one
... our people diverse and beautiful will emerge, battered and beautiful
When day comes we step out of the shade,
afraid and unafraid
The new dawn blooms as we free it
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it
If only we're brave enough to be it."

As we gather in our breakout rooms, let's share how we each hope to be the light for each other, and for the world, during this next chapter of our common life.