

The Message of the Prophets

I would like to start this talk by describing when I have been the most disappointed in President Obama. It wasn't when he failed to get a single-payer universal health care bill passed. It wasn't when he didn't initially support the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." It wasn't that Obama hasn't communicated his message better with the American people. It even wasn't that he bombed Libya (but wow, I was really upset with that). I was the most disappointed when Barak Obama repudiated his minister, The Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who was then the minister of the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago.

I know, I know we have all heard the sound bite "God Damn America." But we never seem to hear it in the context of the larger sermon, which is entitled "Confusing God and Government." The cited passage reads as follows:

And the United States of America government, when it came to treating her citizens of Indian decent fairly, she failed. She put them on reservations. When it came to treating her citizens of Japanese decent fairly, she failed. She put them in internment prison camps. When it came to treating her citizens of African decent fairly, America failed. She put them in chains. The government put them in slave quarters, put them on auction blocks, put them in cotton fields, put them in inferior schools, put them in substandard housing, put them in scientific experiments, put them in the lowest paying jobs, put them outside the equal protection of the law, kept them out of their racist bastions of higher education and locked them into position of hopelessness and helplessness. The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and then wants us to sing "God Bless America." No, no, no. Not "God Bless America"; God Damn America! That's in the Bible, for killing innocent people. God Damn America for treating her citizen as less than human. God Damn America as long as she keeps trying to act like she is God and she is supreme!

So what was the Reverend Jeremiah Wright saying with his sermon. He was saying that the United States could act better, it should act better and it must act better. If you read (or listen) to the entire sermon, you will see that he was saying that we must not confuse our government with God. He was telling us that government does not always act in a correct and moral manner. He was telling us that God does not approve of our actions just because we are the United States of America. In fact, the Reverend Wright was saying that God is angry with our country because of how we treat the poor, the weak, the minorities. That God is angry because of our country's war mongering. That God is angry because the United States exploits the resources of the entire world to make a few people wealthy. Consider, if you translated the Reverend Wright's sermon into archaic prose, it would not be out of place among the books of the Old Testament's Prophets. The Old Testament prophets were always talking about God's wrath falling upon Israel because of the sins of Israel. And by Israel, I do not mean the individuals of Israel, but the "government" of Israel.

Just because Israel was God's chosen people, did not mean that Israel would not feel God's Wrath when they disobeyed God's covenant.

There have been prophets in every religion and in during every era, even if we do not call them prophets. In her book, "The Great Transformation," Karen Armstrong does a thorough and insightful job of describing the historic prophets and sages from several different cultures. When I started planning this sermon, I was going to concentrate on the Old Testament Prophets, but then I started to notice the parallels between the problems decried by the Old Testament prophets and the issues that face the United States today, and the hubris that both countries share – the idea that we are God's chosen.

In the 8th century BCE, though Israel was quite prosperous, there was a huge class differential. The rich were very rich and the poor were very poor. The laws of the Torah were ignored. There was also Assyria poised in the background, ready to conquer the entire region. This was a time of several of the well-known pre-exilic prophets: Amos, Hosea, the first Isaiah, Jonah, and Micah. In ancient Israel and Judah, being a prophet, a speaker in God's name, was an acceptable vocation. There were many prophets, not just the ones that are discussed in the Bible. And most of the prophets were extremely critical of their Kings. Examples of things that the prophets railed against were the unfair use of laws, corrupt economic policies, dishonesty in the market place and the seeking of profit at all costs, bribable judges, political corruption and war-mongering – many of the same things that we, today, complain about. As the prophet Amos states

Amos 8:4-6 "Hear this, you that trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the [measure] small and the shekel great and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and selling the sweepings of the wheat.'"

Besides outlining the faults of the government, the prophets usually gave a pronouncement of doom if Israel did not change her ways. Doom wasn't hard to come by. There was always Assyria or Babylonia or some other country poised nearby, ready to conquer the region, slaughter the inhabitants, and tear the temple to the ground.

Prophetic speech was characterized by two things: an overwhelming sense of an encounter with God, and a message of moral and political judgment. To understand the sense of outrage that the old Jewish prophets felt, one must understand a little about the Biblical notion of justice. Biblical ethics consisted of two distinct parts. Mishpat, which translates as justice, is the idea that any member of the community has the same rights as any other. The other component of Biblical justice is Sadiqah or righteousness, which is the responsibility to fulfill a relationship with God and with other people. This covenant of faithfulness is spelled out in the law codes contained in the Book of Covenant, the Deuteronomic code and the Holiness Code in Leviticus. These law codes were concerned with the rights of the most vulnerable: the widows, the orphans, the strangers, the poor. Among these laws are the following: No interest on loans to the poor; fair and just measures of weight and length and volume, the forbidding of creditors to accost debtors at home,

the prohibition of bribes, and the requirement that wages must be paid on the day that they are earned.

With his sermon, "Confusing God and Government," the Reverend Wright was acting as Obama's prophet. The voice that says that the King cannot do anything he wants to just because he is King; the voice that says that there is a higher authority than the King; the voice that says that the King must fulfill his covenant with God and with his people. Now do not misunderstand me; I do not think that the Reverend Wright is a holy man (whatever a "holy man" may be). He is way too anti-Semitic, and he believes in some crazy conspiracy theories. But in his defense, if you had said to me 40 years ago "the American Government is purposely withholding penicillin from poor black farmers with Syphilis just so researchers can autopsy disease-ridden bodies," or "the U.S. Government is actually injecting Guatemalans with Syphilis for research purposes," well then I would have thought that you too were spouting crazy conspiracy theories. As it turned out, these weren't crazy conspiracy theories at all, but all too real examples of government misconduct. But, the Rev. Wright's shortcomings none-the-less, every King needs a prophet, and Obama repudiated his.

At this point I have to take a break and say something about my personal beliefs. I for one do not believe in a personal god. I do not believe in some anthropomorphic vision of an infinitely-wise, all-powerful, bearded old man sitting on a golden throne who rationalizes and makes decisions like we do - a God who meddles in our lives. This version of God is a very limited God. The belief in that sort of God makes people think that they know what God wants - that there is a specific way of thinking and acting that is required by God. I bring this up because while I am speaking of prophets, I must state that I do not think that God (whatever God may be) speaks to anyone in any way that any person can conceptualize. God does not speak in any way that can allow for any person to know what God wants or thinks. Therefore I personally do not believe that any person speaks for God.

However, I believe that there are people who feel the unbearable sorrow and pain of the world - people who feel horrid agony when they confront the injustice and suffering in the world - people who must speak and act to change the world. These people act as our collective conscience. Thus when I say prophet I am referring to the messengers that cry that all is not well with the world. These prophets do have a necessary spiritual message to impart, a message that tells us how we, as human beings, and as governments, are failing God and our fellow man.

The question is of course who of the many possible "message-bearers" speak as prophets and not as "false prophets" the so-called "Priests of Baal." This can be considered by looking at the message itself. If you consider all the prophets in the old and new testaments and even the modern "prophets" (such as Gandhi or Martin Luther King), there have only been two messages: The first is that God is Holy; the second is that **all** people are Holy. This second message is best described as the concept of Social Justice. Jesus states both of these in Mark 12:28-31 when he says

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the

Lord is one; you shall love the lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

No True Prophet has ever said that the government is doing a good job. A prophet has always been an outsider, a person who is not afraid to say that there is something seriously wrong, that our government is failing us, that our government may, in fact, not be the best government out there. Prophets are not worried about people’s personal missteps, but about the policies and the abuses of power that oppress people, especially the sick, the poor, the weak people, the people who have no power.

False prophets, on the other hand, are silent about the issues of social justice. They function as supporters of rulers and politicians and not as a moral conscience of the government. A person who tells you that personal morality is what God decrees for your personal salvation is a false prophet, a so-called “Priest of Baal”. The person who tells you to look to your own home before fixing the problems of Society is a false prophet. If a person that tells you that your family, or your tribe, or your country is favored by God, then he is a false prophet. If someone tells you to stand in self-righteousness of another, to despise another, to hold yourself separate from another, then he is a false prophet.

Political leaders will embrace the message of these “False Prophets” and use them to say justify their actions. It is easy for the hierarchy to continue with “business as usual” if people are preoccupied with themselves and their local community. Systemic injustices are allowed to perpetuate and flourish while people concentrate on so-called family values. The Rich get richer and the Poor get poorer. Politicians will profess Christian beliefs while consistently acting in ways contrary to biblical justice. They will claim prolife values, while restricting the rights of women. They will talk about smart money management while restricting medical treatment, food, and education to the poor and elderly. They will cite “freedom to work”, while letting companies pollute the environment and pay less-than-subsistent wages. They will cite “freedom of speech” while letting huge corporation bribe politicians and judges. But, remember, Jesus was not executed because he told the common people to be nice to each other and to venerate God. He was executed for his criticism of the hypocrisy of the members of the Jewish hierarchy and for pointing out the social and political injustices that existed in his society. Remember, prophets are not fans of the status quo. There has never been a conservative prophet.

I was told twenty minutes, so I am going to stop now. In conclusion: I am going to leave you with the words of the prophet Micah

Micah 6:8 “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”