Where Have All the Prophets Gone?

There have never been many of them, but every now and then God manages to refresh the earth in general and the faith community in particular with the presence and the preaching of a prophet. I am not referring to some soothsayer who claims to be able to predict the future.

Nor am I referring to self-appointed evangelists who would have us believe that their casual comments about human nature should be received as divine revelation, especially since so much of their insight is offered only at one of their costly conferences or on a CD that comes with a hefty price tag. I am not referring to the modern-day pulpit bandits who confuse prophets with profits!

I am talking instead about that succession of people from Samuel to Elijah, from Micah to Malachi, and from John the Baptist to John Brown. I am talking about those fiery and fearless proponents of justice and righteousness ranging from Henry Highland Garnet and Henry McNeil Turner to Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

I am also talking about that succession of women, from Sojourner Truth to Pauli Murray to Vashti McKenzie, who have confronted prejudice, resisted institutional evil and spoken courageously on behalf of a vision of a more just society.

I am talking about white Protestant clergy such as William Sloane Coffin and Roman Catholic priests such as Philip and Daniel Berrigan. I am talking about rabbis such as Abraham Joshua Heschel and Arthur Lelyveld.

I am talking about a succession of godly and God-fearing men and women who were willing and able to speak truth to power. I am talking about faith-filled servants of God who defied the powers of this world by entrusting themselves to the power and promises of God.

These persons and a handful of others like them are the ones defined here as being prophets. Some prophets have a career that lasts for decades.
That seems to have been the case for Isaiah and Jeremiah, for instance. Others
dash across the stage of history in a blaze of glory, here one moment and gone
the next. That appears to have been the case with Amos and several other of the
Minor Prophets.

However, whether their time on earth was long or short, it was memorable and
constructive. They reminded us of who we said we believed in and they reminded
us of how we had promised to live.

They pointed out to us the high moral and ethical values we had covenanted to
live by, and then they pointed out to us the moral compromises we had made in
order to advance ourselves in this sinful world.

One can still hear the voice of Martin Luther King Jr. crying out to the United
States and reminding us of the promises made and the high moral ground claimed
in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

He was not establishing a new set of goals for this nation. He was calling upon
this nation to live up to its own founding documents, such as the one that says “all
men are created equal.” Over and over again, he could be heard saying, “Just be
true to what you said on paper. Be true to what you have already said you
believe.”

The prophet does not invite people to start down some unfamiliar path. To the
contrary, the prophet points people back to their foundational documents: the
Torah, the Gospels, and the Epistles, and in the case of the United States, its
founding political documents as well.

The future that the prophet is presenting is rooted in the covenants that were
established between the people and God in years now long past. That is the
perspective from which authentic prophetic preaching and prophetic ministry
occur. Prophets do not call people forward without establishing their claim
squarely upon core social values from which many have strayed.

It seems that we have come to a time when such prophetic preaching is not being
heard from the Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish pulpits of the United States. Where
have all the prophets gone?

Perhaps the answer can be found in this litany that is taken from my book Where
Have All the Prophets Gone? And that was used in the inaugural session of the J. Alfred Smith Sr. Prophetic Justice Institute in January 2007.

“With an ungodly and costly war being waged in Iraq (a nation that never attacked the United States), where have all the prophets gone? With over two million persons incarcerated in the nation’s prisons, so that more black men are in jail than are enrolled in college, where have all the prophets gone? When the church can be rallied around such issues as same-sex marriage and abortion but not around justice issues such as the rise of unemployment as a result of the outsourcing of jobs to India and China and Mexico, where have all the prophets gone? When 45 million Americans have no medical insurance, and when one serious illness can consume a lifetime of savings for the average working class family, where have all the prophets gone? When there is a widening achievement gap between some groups in our public schools and an even wider income gap between the richest one percent of our nation and the remainder of our society, where have all the prophets gone?”

If prophetic preaching is to be heard in proportion to the challenges and conditions that confront this country, preachers will have to find the courage to stand up to and speak out against the people and policies responsible for those conditions.

The words that must be spoken are not hidden in some unknown future. The words are rooted in promises made and values espoused in our past. All we need is a man or a woman brave and faith-filled enough to stand up and say to our nation and our world, “This is what the Lord says; just be true to what you said on paper.”

All that would remain would be the presence of a believing community that is willing to respond to what the prophet has said. Prophetic preaching occurs when the preacher seeks to bring the will of God to the attention of the people of God and then, as Elizabeth Achtemeier observes, “to challenge them to trust their God in all circumstances and to obey God with willing and grateful hearts.”

Where have all the prophets gone?

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