

First Friends Church, a Quaker meeting
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
December 20, 2020
What Prophets Know
Mt 2:3-6

Scripture

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."'"

Message

Our hymn- Long Ago Prophets Knew made me wonder about prophecy. In the Bible there is plenty of prophecy but fortune telling: divination, soothsaying and interpreting omens is forbidden.¹ Knowing the future is God's purview. But then what did the prophets know?

The hymn says: "Long ago prophets knew Christ would come, born a Jew... to make all things new, bear his people's burden, freely love and pardon." Our reading reports the Jewish "King" Herod was frightened- and not just about losing his Roman- Appointed crown to the child the magi sought. Herod's tradition made him fear a Messiah- not just a king, an Anointed One of God. More than 700 years before the prophet Micah said, "from ...Bethlehem... one of the little clans ... shall come forth for me one who is to rule... the rest of his kindred shall return ...in the majesty of the name of the Lord..." Or as the hymn says, "... God's

¹ Lev 19:26, Deut 18:11

timeless plan; to come, born of woman, God divinely human.” Not just a new king- Herod knew Micah’s prophecy proclaimed the coming of the Lord.

The hymn also says Mary, “though afraid she believed.” Wait! Matthew says an angel told Joseph he didn’t need to fear marrying Mary² and Luke says Mary was perplexed and pondered what was happening,³ neither one was afraid. Sometimes song writers take license. Which leads me to the next question, “Mary did you know?” We know she knew the magnitude of what was happening- Emanuel! She was there; the angel prophesied the Spirit would come upon her. She knew when the angel proclaimed her Cousin Elizabeth had conceived and when John leaped in his mother’s womb greeting her and Jesus.

Mary also knew when she recited the “*Magnificat*,” the prophetic prayer of women in her tradition. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... God scattered the proud ... brought down the powerful ... and lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty...”

This prayer originated 1100 years before in Hannah’s song praising God for the gift of her son the prophet Samuel. “My heart exults...my strength is exalted in my God... ‘There is no Holy One like God... a God of knowledge... The ... mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. The ...full have hired... out for

² Matt 1: 20b

³ See Luke 1:29- 55 for Luke’s full story

bread, but the hungry are fat... God raises up the poor...lifts the needy...”⁴ Though we know a woman’s worth rested on being able to have children then, Hannah’s song is echoed in Psalm 113. “Praise the LORD! ... Who is like the LORD our God who... raises the poor... lifts the needy... [And- it ends] gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the LORD!”

Mary also knew when Cousin Elizabeth’s husband Zechariah prophesied, “Blessed be the Lord... [who] looks favorably on God’s people and redeems them. God has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of David, as God spoke through ... prophets... that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us... that we... might serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness... all our days.”⁵ And weren’t Hannah, Joseph, Mary and Zechariah part of the tradition and prophetic vision of every parent; giving thanks to God for the gift and hoping and knowing their child has the potential to change the world?

These prophecies, prayers and traditions have things in common. God always wants the best for us and cares for the least, the poor, the downtrodden. God is present and calls and lures, strengthens, sends relief and offers salvation, inviting and welcoming us into an intimate and ultimate relationship with God. Prophecies follow a formula. There is warning and encouragement: “Abide with me. If you go the other way there are obvious consequences! Stop, think. You

⁴ 1 Samuel 2:1–10
⁵ Luke 1: 68-75

make your choices!” There is a reminder and comfort: “You had options, made choices and knew what would happen. But I AM always present and accept you just as you are.” Finally, “I give you hope and new choices and ways to enter the future with me.” This formula works for individuals, groups and whole countries. The prophets knew and the prophets know and they are all around us if we listen.

Here is a 2019 prophecy from Diana Ohlbaum, FCNL senior strategist and legislative director for foreign policy that calls to us today. “I came ...because I was angry, I was afraid, and I was outraged. Our president was cozying up to racists and carrying out undeclared wars...showering billions on the Pentagon while shredding social safety nets... marching us toward nuclear war and annihilation of the planet. No, that wasn’t Donald Trump. [It] was Ronald Reagan.

Today those challenges seem almost quaint in comparison to the current hyper-militarized, hyper-polarized environment. I know how easy it is to sink into frustration and despair. Indeed, sometimes it feels like one step forward, two steps back. You and I know this isn’t right. This aggressive, bullying approach to [everything] is not only ineffective, counterproductive, self-destructive, and often unconstitutional, but also morally repugnant... [and] incompatible with Quaker teachings, as well as with universally-accepted principles of human rights and international law, and the ethical traditions of every society and every religion.

Our addiction to the ways of war is so all-consuming that we are blinded to the harm we cause ourselves and others. We have drunk so deeply of hubris, greed, and vanity that we can see in our nation's conduct only honor, generosity, and virtue... It goes ...back to the origins of our nation. [We need a] paradigm change ... what Dr. King called a “radical revolution of values,” a challenge to the fear, arrogance and bigotry that cause us to seek ... domination. [We need] a new paradigm ...recognizing that we can't make ourselves more ... by making others less... It all starts by looking within. [Ourselves and our country.]

After people engage in self-reflection and open themselves to new ways of thinking, we inspire and empower them to act... It won't be easy, and it won't be quick. But... Quakers...are prophetic...persistent...powerful. We are in it for the long haul and ...because our consciences compel us... we lead not only with our hearts, but also with our heads. This is an important moment ... when so much looks dark and gloomy, but in which all the seeds of change can germinate... constructive, peaceful and positive change. [This is] the right moment...”⁶

The revelations of a prophet are practical and spiritual. They are a deep conviction of the soul and faith in things not (yet) seen but known in the heart. What kind of world do you [have faith] in? “I [have faith] in ... a world where our interconnection is a deeply known and motivating force, where no one is left out,

⁶ <https://www.fcni.org/updates/2019-11/building-movement-new-peaceful-foreign-policy>

where the innate dignity of every person is acknowledged, and where hatred and fear and greed can be tempered...where change might be hard but is always seen as possible, however stuck we might feel in any given moment... where we can have wisdom to guide us... love to propel us, and ... the support of one another to try to accomplish a vision of inclusion and care. I also [have faith]in justice in a world where actions have consequences, where people are held accountable even as we try to take care of one another... where the fluidity and softness of love- like water- might superficially seem like the weakest thing of all, but lo and behold, it is indomitable. It can even wear away rock...”⁷

I read only part of Micah’s prophecy that frightened Herod. The ending is a comfort. “And they shall live secure... he shall be the one of peace.” What is your prophecy? Our hymn encourages and asks, “Journey ends where afar Bethlehem shines like a star, stable door stands a jar, unborn son of Mary Savior do not tarry. When he comes who will make him welcome?” God is transcendent- God’s possibilities transcend all time and space because God is also imminent, everywhere, every when, everyone. Let us find ways to welcome God.

⁷ Sharon Salzberg, Real Change: Mindfulness to Heal Ourselves and the World