**Nobody’s Free Until Everybody’s Free**

**Isaiah 61:1-4**

Shonagh Taruza

August 9, 2020

*Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches?* Isaiah 10:1-3 (NIV)

These are the words of the prophet Isaiah. The Hebrew prophets are well-known for their strong, shocking words and proclamations of woe. The role of the prophet was to speak to the people on God’s behalf which is why they spoke boldly with authority and in an urgent tone. The prophets didn’t answer to people; they answered to God. Listen to this account of the prophet Jeremiah’s call: *Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,*

*“Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”* Jeremiah 1:9-10

The prophets listened for God’s voice and then looked out at the world from God’s perspective. They were able to do this from the intimate relationship that they had with God. This meant that they saw what others couldn’t easily see and heard what others couldn’t hear; corruption and idolatry, the plight of the marginalized, and the cries of the oppressed. They desperately wanted everyone to see what they saw, hence the harshness and urgency of their tone. They lamented the sins of the community and then demanded justice and righteousness. They prophesied judgment, doom and complete destruction if the people did not heed their words and turn from their evil ways. By doing this, they served as the conscience of the community; as a moral compass. It was not all messages of doom and gloom though. They also spoke of repentance, redemption, restoration, and reconciliation with God.

Isaiah also prophesied the coming of Immanuel, meaning God with us, and Jesus was the embodiment of the prophetic tradition. In fact Jesus launched his public ministry by reading from Isaiah recorded in the gospel of Luke. Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”*

After he had finished reading and received praise, Jesus then acknowledged to the people that “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown,” a lesson he probably learned from the example of the Hebrew prophets. As he continued to speak, he reminded the gathered crowd of times of God’s judgment thereby enraging the gathered crowd so much to the point that they ended up driving him out of town intent on throwing him off a cliff, thus effectively proving him right. Jesus, however, as we know, continued in his ministry taking the side of the marginalized, the outcast, the oppressed, delivering harsh words to the Pharisees and Sadducees, boldly speaking truth to power, and then at one time even overturning the tables of money changers and driving out those who were buying and selling in the temple. He upset the religious leaders and the powerful so much that they conspired, had him arrested, crucified, and then killed.

Jesus and the Hebrew prophets played a very important role in their respective cultures, but every generation also has its own prophetic voices that continue this tradition. The prophetic voices here in this country have been speaking up for centuries. They have pointed out that slavery was a totally unnecessary evil. That America after being built by enslaved labor, replaced slavery with segregation of the races, and then after that a racist system that favors and protects white people, and oppresses and destroys Black lives. They have spoken up about the genocide of Native Americans, and the theft of their tribal lands, and they have protested against pipelines unlawfully laid on sacred tribal lands. They have spoken of the deep betrayal of the detention in internment camps of Americans simply because they were of Japanese ancestry. They have pointed out the origins of generational cycles of poverty, the legacy of redlining and segregation in education and how Black and Brown people continue to be exploited by corporate greed. How in a country that prides itself on exceptionalism, people die from the lack of adequate health care, and hundreds of thousands live with hunger and food insecurity. They have reminded us of the horrific Tuskegee syphilis experiment, of Flint and other communities of color being poisoned by environmental racism. Of kids in cages. Of Black people being murdered by the police; being failed by a broken criminal justice system, and then forced into a new form of slavery within the prison industrial complex. Of voter suppression and disenfranchisement. And now, how Black and brown people unwillingly are serving as America's sacrificial lamb of the Covid pandemic and being infected and dying disproportionately. They've told us that this was NOT the will of God, but most did not seem to hear them because nothing really changed.

Following the news of acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of seventeen year old Trayvon Martin, Alicia Garza, a young queer Black woman posted a love letter to Black people on Facebook expressing her heartbreak. She wrote: "I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter... Our lives matter." Her friend Patrice Cullors then shared this post on Twitter with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. And then another friend Opal Tometi then took it a step further and built an online network where people could respond and organize. This was the birth of the Black Lives Movement.

In May this year, we all learned of the brutal killings of Ahmaud Arberry, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, and we saw clearly what they had been telling us and shared this heartbreak. All over the world people saw and understood. And we grieved. Seven years later, the Black Lives Matter movement is now the largest movement in US history, and possibly global history. These three Black women follow in a tradition of strong prophetic Black female American voices that include Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Angela Davis, just to name a few; bold women who have spoken truth to power, urged people to see what they saw, and then worked for the liberation that they envisioned.

Remember that the prophets of old in addition to pointing out injustice and oppression, also envisioned a world where people sought good and not evil, where the people who walked in darkness shall see a great light. Well I believe that 2020 is a year of reckoning for us as a country. Isaiah asked “*What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar?”* It’s make or break time, and I am hopeful. There’s a lot of fear mongering going on right now with the intention of dividing and conquering the critical mass that is developing. There’s a huge amount of misinformation going around that has the intention of distracting and confusing people. I find myself getting distracted. But as people of God, we listen for God’s voice.

We can also listen to the prophetic voices of our times to hear and understand what they are telling us. If the protests in Portland have been able to continue for over two months and even grow in strength, and then also ignite further protests around the country, and even right here in our town outside our church, then clearly there’s a message that the protesters are trying to share that they feel is not being heard.

Some of the signs the protesters hold up tell us, “*I can’t breathe*” “*End police brutality*” “*Stop killing us.*” They demand justice for the murdered, as they chant “*Say their names*” “*Breonna Taylor*” “*George Floyd*” “*No justice, no peace*.” In doing this, it reminds us that these were God’s beloved children murdered unlawfully, and that God too is grieving. And then they lead us all in grieving by kneeling or lying down on the ground while observing moments of silence that last for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. They remind us that all were created in God’s image and likeness and that Black lives do matter. One day the protests will stop, but the prophetic voices will continue to speak. And we need them to. We need them to help us see what we can’t see, so that we can work to fix what is broken. This is the will of God.

We must always remember that WE too are called to be a continuation of that prophetic tradition. We too are being called to speak up with bold prophetic voices as well as to share messages of love and hope. As Christians our faith tunes us into the heart of God. That intimacy will move our hearts to the margins of society where we will take our place and stand with the oppressed and outcast, because God’s heart is there.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us empowering us to demand an end to racist policies, police brutality, and oppressive decrees, As people tuned in to God’s healing mercy, we are called to work on dismantling racism, to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives locked away in the prison industrial complex, and recovery of sight to the blind who are oblivious to the sin of systemic racism. WE are called to work on setting the oppressed free in order to free us all. Because the divine spirit that is within those being oppressed is the same divine spirit that is within each of us. That which separates and divides us, racism and greed, was constructed and created by humans, and it's up to us to tear those walls down.

Civil rights legend Fannie Lou Hamer in 1971 said: *"Now, we've got to have some changes in this country. And not only changes for the black man, and only changes for the black woman, but the changes we have to have in this country are going to be for liberation of all people — because nobody's free until everybody's free”*

This is as true today as it was in 1971. May it be so.