

“Stand By to Prophecy!”

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Text: Numbers 11:24-30; Acts 2:1-6, 14-18

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I'm sure you heard of the recent death of Baptist Preacher Jerry Falwell. While I know Falwell had thousands of fans, I was not one of them. I did not care for his theology, nor the causes he promoted through his Moral Majority. “Moral Majority” was a great name to use for his organization – after all, most of us consider ourselves moral and most of us want to be in the majority whatever we're involved in.

The problem I had with that approach is that I didn't believe it was Biblical. The Bible knows nothing of a moral majority. It assumes the individual conscience, as opposed to the mass mind, best reflects the universal conscience of humankind. And the Bible insists that a prophetic minority always has more to say to a nation than any majority, silent, moral, or any other. As a matter of fact, majorities in the Bible generally ended up stoning the prophets.

The role of prophecy figures prominently in both of our texts this morning. But before we go any further we need to clarify what we're talking about when we speak of prophecy and prophets. Contrary to what many in churches today believe, a Biblical prophet is not a fortune teller or a soothsayer. A prophet is not a foreteller. Rather a prophet is a forth-teller – a spokesperson – someone who speaks truth – God's truth – to power. A prophet speaks a word from God to a contemporary situation. Another word for prophecy might be discernment. The prophet was able to see a situation as it really was – where the present course of action could lead if not corrected – that's why a word from God had to be spoken.

In our lesson from the book of Numbers, we hear of someone, in the words of Will Willimon, “running to Moses and tattling – telling him that Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp. Earlier, the Lord, after speaking to Moses, took a notion to spread a little Spirit on some of the elders, Spirit that the Lord had previously disbursed mainly on the Lord's head man, Moses. Now, having received the gift of the Spirit, Eldad and Medad get downright talkative and begin speaking for the Lord. Joshua isn't crazy about it and tells Moses to stop them.”

We can't have uncredentialed, uncertified people prophesying, speaking for God! Those things must be done decently and in order. Today Medad and Eldad. Tomorrow my son or daughter. Joshua asks Moses for a prophetic restraining order. But Moses responds, would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit on them. Moses, who wasn't good at speaking until God gave him some help, now says that there are never too many Spirit-gifted prophets. This episode from the book of Numbers foreshadows another prophetic spiritual breakout in Acts 2.

At Pentecost, all were gathered in one place. Then there was a rush of wind, tongues of fire, the Holy Spirit. As in the book of Numbers, the Spirit's gift is the gift of speech, prophecy. As in Numbers 11, the Spirit's creation of a multitude of preachers results in communal bewilderment. Amazed and astonished, they ask, “What does this mean?” Peter refers them to the prophet Joel. In earlier days, the Spirit was poured out on a few gifted individuals called prophets. But according to Joel, there will be a day when God's Spirit shall be poured out on all. All. Even among the typically voiceless – old women and old men, young people out of work, maids, janitors – God's Spirit shall descend in the later days, bringing things to speech. Those who never appear on the pages of the *New York Times*, those who never asked to say a few words at the microphone, shall speak. Would that all the Lord's people were prophets. That day is now – Pentecost has made that a reality. Those prophets are us.

Now you've heard me speak before of my belief in the idea that ministers have dual roles as pastor and prophet – that we not only comfort the afflicted but we are to afflict the comfortable – we are to love the people in our care and part of that love is demonstrated in speaking the truth – proclaiming the gospel – bringing God's word to bear on the contemporary setting – even when it is unpopular to do so.

You've also heard me express my hope that I don't hesitate in speaking out for fear of your reaction. As Bill Coffin once said, “Too many ministers are dependent on the love of their congregation. A real friend is one who risks his friendship for the sake of his friend, rather than using the friend for the sake of their relationship. The clergy don't speak out because they don't want to risk the love of that congregation.” I am hopeful that is not the case for us. So I acknowledge my role as prophet. But we misunderstand today's Scripture if we have the notion that only preachers are called to be prophets. You are called to be God's prophets, all of you.

I read of a pastor who was chastised for not taking a stance on a given issue. His parishioner said to him, "You are our preacher. People expect us to take stands on issues." "What people?" the pastor asked. "Like people where we work. How are we to think through these matters if we don't get some assistance from the pulpit?"

Well, the parishioner was correct. Martin Luther said that we preachers speak on Sunday so that the whole church can preach all week long. I preach in church so that you can preach at the office, or school, or wherever you are during the week. So I need you to keep prodding me – to keep expecting me to help you think through your faith so you can be prophets and speak your faith to others.

So we gather in this place on Sunday morning and we speak to each other about God and Christ, so that we might get the courage and strength and conviction to leave here and to speak to those around us about God and Christ. Your preaching is the test of my preaching. Now I know you have a more difficult assignment than do I in being a prophet. I stand up here, protected by the church and tradition. I even have a robe and stole which works to my advantage.

Did you know that in the early days of our Republic, American judges made a big deal of not wearing wigs or robes like their British counterparts. But as years went by, judges started putting on robes in order to preside at court and make their judgments. Why? A judge explained it this way: "When you are going to stand in judgment over somebody's life, you need all the help you can get. That robe helps you to get the words out of your mouth."

So if I'm going to stand up here and speak for God, I need all the help I can get! And most times it's not difficult to speak out in the name of Christ. But you as a layperson don't have the advantage of a pulpit or a robe and stole. In the classroom, on the sales floor, working out in the shop with ten other people, it takes great courage to be the one to speak up for the right, to bring the truth to speech, no matter the consequences. I've been to work with several of you – I know some things about many of you and I've learned to admire the way many of you testify to the truth in your daily lives. Would that all of God's people were prophets.

The Acts 2 Pentecostal text for prophecy is not a tally of how many preachers give advice to Congress. It is rather a count of how many prophets we have produced – people who are able to speak truth to power – people who are ready to speak out clearly and pay up personally, people who pray for grace to contend against wrong without becoming wrongly contentious, who pray for grace to fight pretensions of national righteousness without personal self-righteousness – people like us – men and women, clergy and laity, teachers and mechanics and secretaries and professors and retired people – all with visions and dreams and who don't mind telling the world about them.

I'm talking about me and you and you and you. On Pentecost, God's promised Holy Spirit descended on all. Everyone received the power to speak, to tell the whole world what had happened in Jesus Christ.

God's Holy Spirit is that power that enables you and me to speak about the good news. The question I have is this: Have you been letting God's Spirit work in you? Have you been speaking up for Jesus? When was the last time you shared your faith with someone at work or your social circle? Can you name some moment from your recent life when you were surpassed by your courage and determination to do the right thing, even though that was unpopular? I'm not the sole prophet for this congregation. You are all God's prophets. Now get out of here and prophesy!

Let us pray: Give us the strength we need to be your spokespersons, to speak empowered by your Spirit. Each day we encounter people who do not know the story of your love in Jesus Christ. We often have the opportunity to speak your word in a situation of mean spiritedness or injustice. Every day we meet those whose only glimpse of your power to transform will be through observation of us and our actions. Help us to be your prophets. Make us bold to speak your truth, in love. Empower us to speak, in your name. Amen.

This sermon is an adaptation of a sermon by William Willimon. Thanks also to the late Bill Coffin for his thoughts on the role of prophets.