

A Hinge Point Jan. 31, 2021

I am ten years old, flying down our street on my bike with Robert, my best friend, on a Saturday morning.

We are headed to the Glenside Hardware Store, and our mission is to buy hinges. Hinges for the door of the fort we've been building in my back yard. We'll have a padlock for the door, of course, to keep out our younger siblings, but hinges are important too. Will our door open inward only, outward, or both - we'll need the right kind of hinge. We finally choose two shiny steel hinges, screws and a few extra nails, just because it is so fun to run our hands through the bags and feel their jingle. Our hinges and lock will protect our fort, a secure refuge for our fifth-grade imaginations and a defense from the bullying Smith brothers across the street as well as the little siblings.

I've been thinking about hinges in these past months as our country has been passing through a cataclysmic time of change - political, pandemic, racial and climate. I believe there are moments in time that can be seen as hinge moments - hinges because they open up into a new future and close out a sorry past - or - hinges that block out a scary future and keep us secure in the old familiar places. Or, thirdly, hinges that open in both directions - in and out, backwards and forwards. My hope is that we are now at that third kind of hinge in time. And at such times as these, we need prophets; we need them desperately. Prophets can be those who stand among us like hinges - opening us up to life, both forward and backward.

Often we think of prophets as those who can foretell the future, but they are far more than seers or fortune-tellers. Prophets are wise, imaginative and visionary, and we need them in every age. This morning's reading reminds us of how important a prophet is, how they can connect us with God's presence in the world and in history. Moses, in the reading from Deuteronomy, speaks of how prophets are raised up from their own people, how they are channels for God's word and as such, will often stand against established powers. Prophets need to look deeply to the past and reflect, but they also can imagine a new future; they can look forward to a vision. They can be critical agents at hinge points in history.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes about the importance of imagination in the work of prophets in his wonderful small book [The Prophetic Imagination](#). He sees prophets as agents who both criticize and energize their people. Prophets' imagination can move us beyond all the places where we are bogged

down by history and tradition; their imagination provokes transformation towards the way things might be if God's realm came closer, if realm became reality.

At the heart of Breuggemann's thinking about prophets is his insistence that their work begins in lament and anguish, leading to criticism, and only then to the promise of new possibility. We can't move on by closing the door on the past, forgetting about it or denying its long shadows. Many of us personally, and St. Columba's as a church, and people all over the country are caught up now in exploring anti-racism, probably in more depth, at least for white folks, than ever before. The books White Fragility, How to be an Anti-Racist, My Grandmother's Hands, Waking Up White, and so many others force us to look deeply into our past and face uncomfortable truths.

This has been tough for me because I tend to think my own exposure to racism growing up wasn't severe, that my entanglement in white supremacy is structural more than personal, and that I don't feel a huge amount of guilt as an individual. Which immediately makes me wonder if this isn't in itself a sign of the imbedded racism I bear, a defensive denial. And so I press on, as so many of us do, looking back into the many places in our history where our ancestors were oppressive and unjust. We must learn about, acknowledge and then lament what has been done and own it as part of who we are. Only then, can we move forward, only then can the hinge open the other way, from back into the past to forward into a new tomorrow.

And, as I've said, for this work we need prophets, we need prophetic imagination. As in the Bible and in history, so in our time, prophets do indeed arise. As in Deuteronomy, they are raised up from among their own people. Prophets are those who point to God's work - what God has done, what God is doing, what God will do. They speak out about what needs to happen, and in their very speaking, their vision begins to unfold; their message, boldly proclaimed, has power in itself, power to call action into being, power to call us to participate.

Some years ago, my husband Bill, wrote a hymn about prophets and their role. Here are some of the lyrics:

“Where are the prophets who'll help us to grieve,
grieve what we cling to and know we must leave:
power and privilege and pride in one's kind
with little or no care for those left behind?”

Where are the prophets who dare face the night,
entering the darkness while we chase the light...

Where are the prophets who'll help us find hope,
kindling our courage to change and to cope
in a new world whose resources we share?
Oh, where are the prophets to summons us there?"

Many of our prophets are notable, famous people, down through history and in our own day. Martin Luther King, Jr., of course - and Nelson Mandela, and Gandhi and John Lewis, surely. Dorothy Day, the social activist, qualifies as a prophet in my book. One of the things Father Dan Berrigan said about Day was that "she lived as though the truth were true," - that seems such an apt description of the prophetic role - living as though the truth were true. Prophets have risen up around us in the church during these past difficult years - Michael Curry, our presiding Bishop, and The Rev. William Barber, a prominent preacher and co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign: A National call for Moral Revival, to name just two.

There are prophetic voices in secular circles, even in, yes, politics! Those who point beyond what seems currently possible or popular to what might be - Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, perhaps even our Vice-President who embodies as a female of color in her office, something once unimaginable. And, perhaps most exciting, are young prophetic voices: the teen-aged Greta Thunberg, the Swedish climate activist, and only couple of weeks ago, the young poet, Amanda Gorman who burst upon us at the inauguration. Ledlie quoted some of her words last week; this week I add some as well:

We are striving to forge a union with purpose,
to compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and
conditions of man.
And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us,
but what stands before us.

For while we have our eyes on the future,
history has its eyes on us.
We did not feel prepared to be the heirs
of such a terrifying hour
but within it we found the power
to author a new chapter.
To offer hope and laughter to ourselves.

We will not march back to what was,
but move to what shall be.
A country that is bruised but whole,
benevolent but bold,
fierce and free.

These are words for this hinge time - words that move backwards and forwards between history and hope. And perhaps, most importantly, words that move us to action, words that actually begin to make real the vision of the poet, the vision of the prophet. As Gorman herself said, “I don’t just want to speak words; I want to turn them into realities and actions.”

Prophets call and inspire us. But most important of all is the power of prophecy to bring about action and change. So finally there is this question: where in each of us is that prophetic urge, that deep prompting of the heart to do something, to make a difference, and to answer God’s call? Any of us, if not over a lifetime, but even just in fleeting moments, can glimpse the prophet’s vision and can act to bring about change. My 86 year old sister-in-law just began to volunteer at a food bank in Alexandria. Teenagers with time on their hands are delivering groceries to seniors. Many of us are stepping into our conversations at St. Columba’s about being an anti-racist church. These conversations are prophetic witness, and we pray they will lead to effective action and help bring about real change. In fact, our mission, to “Live God’s Love” is well-aligned with not only the Biblical prophets of old, but with those in our own day. Both prophecy and our own response are very real and present channels for God’s love here and now.

Finally, another quote from Dorothy Day captures what prophecy is about and how love is our best response. She says, and I quote:

“The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us?”... “We have all known the long loneliness, and we have learned that the only solution is love, and that love comes with community.” End of quote, and Amen.