

Sermon written and delivered by the Reverend George Anastos

Text: God will raise up prophets in your midst.

In both Jewish and Christian tradition it is universally agreed that the greatest of all prophets is Moses. Moses did something that no else had ever done. In fact, if we use the "reasonable person test," Moses failed; he did something that no reasonable person would ever have even tried. Because what Moses did was thoroughly unrealistic. In fact, what made Moses the greatest prophet was the fact that his actions were NOT based in reality. Think about that for a second. The "reality" of Moses' day, and the peculiar reality of the Hebrews of that time, was an enslaved existence under a political dynasty that was the most powerful the world had ever seen. Part and parcel of that power, in fact what it rested on, was the systematic exploitation of the majority to serve the minority, the weak to serve the strong, the expendable to serve the entitled. It was a reality of oppression, violence and poverty. *And no one had ever seen any other way of being.* A government of the people, by the people and for the people would never, ever, have occurred to anyone; it was not an alternative. Those ideas were millennia in the future of human development. Yet into that world of domination and poverty steps Moses, and he counters that world view with one of compassion, justice and freedom. This is an extremely important point, because what emerged here was NOT just a new religion, but, as Walter Brueggemann notes, what also emerged here was "the emergence of a new social community in history."¹ Moses and the people of the Exodus found themselves involved in the intentional formation of a new social reality, one that did not match any existing paradigm in the world.² Where did Moses get the vision to do what he did and build what he built if he did not (obviously) get it from any existing model in the world? He got it from outside himself by going inside himself; he got it from the imagination of God. For this is what a prophet does: the prophet looks not to the present reality for its truth, but instead looks to the mind of God and to God's imaginative expressions and seeks to shape reality to that as yet unrealized and unrealistic future.

Understood in that context, today's lesson has unusual relevance for us today, for our children present with us in the sanctuary this morning, and for the reality in which we live. For we are inheritors of the prophetic tradition; we are, as an incarnate community, expressions of the divine imagination, and we stand as an alternative reality to any system or way that oppresses, that is violent, that is unfair, unjust and unmerciful.

We are the inheritors of the prophetic tradition. Strange that, for that is not how Christianity has been practiced for the major part of its history. One of the deep, and justified, criticisms of the Church in general, and the mainline church in particular, as Dr. Trickett noted in last week's sermon, is that it has become domesticated—enculturated—by the world around it. Rather than existing as an alternative community to mundane values, we, as the mainline church, have embraced those values and even provided the theological justification for them. In domesticated Christianity, to be a good Christian is to be a good citizen, and to be a good citizen is to be a good Christian. And that is the opposite of what it means to stand in the prophetic tradition. Prophetic communities do not justify the way of the world, they proclaim the Way of

¹ Brueggemann, Walter; *The Prophetic Imagination*; second edition; Fortress Press; Minneapolis; 2001; page 7.

² *ibid*; page 7.

God. Prophetic communities do not look to reality as it exists in the present and justify that, they look to the imaginative freedom of God, and work toward that. Prophetic communities do not simply criticize the world as it is, they envision the world as it could, and will, be. To stand in the prophetic tradition, as Brueggemann notes, "*is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us*" (italics in the original).³

When we are at our finest, when we are biblically faithful, we stand in the prophetic tradition, we witness as a prophetic community, and we therefore nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception of the world which is alternative to the consciousness and perception of the culture around us. Like Moses, we are called to see what does not yet exist, to hear the cries that the world silences, and to work for a world which we will likely not see come to fruition in our own lifetimes, and to do all this in our own context: in the place and time of our own era. Thus, in the midst of municipal budget crises we speak for superb education for children in poor communities as well as in rich ones. In the midst of leaders who promote peace as a balance of power and terror, we speak peace as rifles beaten into plowshares, missiles into pruning hooks. In the midst of a culture that not so subtly teaches that the one with most toys when he dies wins, we teach that the one who has no toys left when she dies is free, and there are no winners, because in God's kin-dom there can be no losers. In a culture with a value system that sells elixirs to comfort us in our afflictions, we actually practice a value system that will afflict ourselves in our own comfort.

And of course we know, we understand, that this prophetic attitude is *unrealistic*. It was unrealistic for Moses before us, and it will be unrealistic for our children after us. But it is in *this* unreality that we nevertheless stand. For this unreality is God's imagined reality. This unreality is the hoped for reality of those who need food, shelter, justice and mercy. This unreality is that on which we stake our existence as a people of God, as an incarnate beloved community, as an alternative to those who say it can't be done and to get with the program. For those who tell us to "Get real" our response is to say, "No, we work to get unreal."

How else, how else my sisters and brothers in Christ, do we understand the unreality of Christ's witness 2,000 years ago, and our practice of the Eucharist today? The ministry of Christ, and Eucharist, Holy Communion, *communion*, are the ultimate expressions of the unrealistic, divine imagination at work in our hands and in our hearts. It is here, in the broken bread the shed wine that we stand shoulder to shoulder with Christ, and with all faithful people in all lands and even in all religions who defy "reality" and work toward a vision of peace, reconciliation, mercy and compassion. This bread and wine, this body and blood, is the symbolic nourishment of our prophetic witness that we consciously weave into the fabric of who we are and which we have the guts to teach our children. The life, ministry, rejection, death and resurrection of Christ is God incarnate, is the ultimate expression of the divine imagine at work, is the act of a God who loves so deeply that despite the guarantee of both hell and high water when it is practiced and preached, God makes God's own self manifest in Christ, and in also us, that reality will be shaped to God's image, and not vice versa.

³ *ibid.*, page 3.