

“Prophet, Priest, and King”

Sermon preached at Christ Lutheran Church, Waterloo

Sunday, December 29, 2013 / 2nd Sunday of Christmas, Year A

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When I was with my kids last week, we listened, as I often do at this time of year, to parts of George Frederick Handel's *Messiah*. And once again I marvelled at how much of my own theology, my own piety, is shaped by that music.

The texts for *Messiah* were put together by an obscure Anglican cleric of Handel's acquaintance named Jennings, selected almost word for word from the so-called King James Bible. And what a splendid work those words are! Jennings has put together almost everything you need to know about the Church's views of Jesus.

Of course it's the music that makes those words sing. To this day I can't read certain Bible verses without hearing Handel's glorious music. "...His name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace " That's from Isaiah 6 What a wonderful heaping up of titles!

There are three other Bible names for the Coming One that I want to focus on today: Prophet, Priest, and King. I want to suggest a kind of shorthand metaphor for each of these titles.

Let's think of the Prophet's word to us as “No”.

Let's think of the Priest's word to us as “Yes”.

And let's think of the King's word – the Royal word – as “Amen.”

I can't remember where I first heard that scheme suggested; Maybe it was completely original with me. But it sounds too good to be my own. I must have picked it up along the way somewhere. In any case, bear with me.

Of course, let's not be too romantic: All three words – no, yes, and amen – often carry the price tag of suffering. Depending on our circumstances, we often don't want to hear any of them. Change is too scary. Even yes. Even amen. Those messages are often resisted, their messengers persecuted. That's a warning worth remembering even before we begin.

First then, Prophet. The Prophet stands among us and says “No”. Of course a Prophet will be saying much more than no. Even “yes” and “amen” sometimes. But for the sake of these next few minutes, let's concentrate on that negative, that radical word of judgement and criticism and even condemnation that's implied in that “no”.

I hear Jesus coming among us and speaking a prophetic “no” against everything that's wrong in our world. Injustice, inequity, unrighteousness. “Woe to you, scribes and pharisees, hypocrites!...” That's certainly not a positive word. It's a radically negative judgement against every evil.

Jesus says “no”. Not all the time, but certainly part of the time.

It's not a word I want to hear, most often. That kind of negative judgement is more than challenging; it's often downright offensive. But we have to hear it.

And I hear Jesus calling his followers to speak that same “no” in our own situation whenever we see wrong -- anything in our society that's out of kilter, not the picture of God's righteousness that we ought to be living out.

Among us, in this congregation, you can hear that radical, prophetic “no” most often from people like Oz or Nadine or Richard. It's to their credit that they're here, reminding us that our world is not yet perfect. There are injustices to be righted, even where we live, there are inequities to be levelled out. That prophetic “no” may come to us as deeply troubling. But we have to hear it.

Or we're not faithful to Jesus' own mandate to us.

Sure, the Christian faith ought to be enculturated, embracing and endorsing and even exhibiting all the best values and beliefs and enthusiasms of the society it lives in, as much as possible.

But there are also times when the Christian faith has to be counter-cultural – opposed to what the culture around it is trying to sell. (For what it's worth, our faith ought to be trans-cultural and cross-cultural as well. But that's another sermon...)

OK, that's the prophetic word. A “no” against everything that's wrong. In our world, in our society, in our community, in our families, in our own lives.

Now the Priestly word – following my scheme – is “Yes”. That's not a radical word. It's a conservative word. It's a word that wants to support, and conserve,

and defend, and affirm, and build up.

That was part of Jesus' ministry as well. Jesus was there with compassion for the poor, the enslaved, the marginalized, the women, the children. He said "yes" to them all, in a society that did not treasure them.

Slaves, women, even children were simply men's property in Jesus' day. All of them less than second class citizens. To these outcasts, and to much more in his world, Jesus says "yes".

Now I hear Jesus calling us to the same affirmations. We are to say "yes" to our world, wherever that word of affirmation and support is needed.

Here's an example.

When we moved to Waterloo, my wife and I bought this lovely old home at 157 Albert Street, right across from the Seminary at the end of Bricker Street. You know the place I'm speaking of? White Victorian farm house with green shutters and a wrap-around front porch, surrounded by towering Norwegian pine trees. The University now owns it, and they call it the *Lucinda House*, after the wife of the first owner.

When Kathy and I bought it, it needed some work: a new roof, a new back porch, a new front porch. Right away we put in a new cedar shingle roof, and in the next years a new front porch and new back porch, replicating what was there, right down to the gingerbread and cannonball finials on the front steps.

You got the feeling that if any one else had bought it, they'd tear off the porch and put in a redwood deck.

Now there's an outfit called the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario, and they saw we were serious about the architectural integrity of that lovely old building, and sure enough, in due course they declared the place a Heritage Building.

So we had a ceremony on a sunny Sunday afternoon, with the Mayor and the Town Council and invited guests gathered on the lawn for speech making. Our own James Brown played our little pump organ brought out onto the front porch, and Debbie Lou Ludolph sang *Home Sweet Home*. Kathy had prepared a wonderful reception and everyone toured our home.

Now I like to think we said "yes" to that old house. It's one of the three oldest buildings in Waterloo – 1836 -- and now, thanks to us, it will never see a

wrecking ball. I'm as proud of that as anything I've accomplished in my lifetime.

That's just a sample. There's stuff out there – buildings, places, people, institutions, causes, movements – that need your affirmation, your support, your defending, your conserving. Christians should be among the first to say “yes” to them.

OK, that's second. The Priestly “yes”.

Here's third: The Kingly word, the Royal word: “Amen”. Remember what that word means from your catechism? “So be it! It shall be so!”

Now this is a creative, transforming word. It's not spoken over against the surrounding society, the *status quo*, like “yes” and “no”, those other two words in my system. This dares to do a new thing, to pose a new possibility, to build a new model, “to sing a new song.”

Jesus does this too in his ministry in the Bible: “You have heard it said of old...but I say unto you...” That's the Royal “amen” I'm pointing to.

And you are invited to say the same world-building word. That “amen”: it offers up the possibility of something new.

I'm thinking of the world-changing witness of people like Francis of Assisi, Albert Schweitzer, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela. They changed the world. And they changed it by saying “Amen! So be it! It shall be so!”

Remember, there was a time when criminals were executed in the city square as public entertainment. No more, at least in most civilized countries.

There was a time when people defended the practice of slavery by citing Bible verses. No more.

There was a time when blacks and women and gays were all held back simply out of prejudice.

We're still working on that stirring promise of St. Paul: “Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female, left wing and right wing...” We are all one in Christ Jesus.

The world can change. People can change. We are not prisoners of our past.

I'll close with a terrific quote from Martin Luther. I wouldn't want to endorse everything Luther said, but this one is a beaut.

He says, "We are the Lords – with and without that apostrophe, with and without that possessive."

We are the Lord's – with the apostrophe, with the possessive: We belong to Jesus Christ. In baptism we are his own. Nothing can undo that washing in water. Nothing can reverse that. We belong to the Lord.

But also, get this: We are the Lords – without that apostrophe, without that possessive. A simple plural: We are the Lords. We are Royalty.

Now: Go out and live that way.

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