

FINDING OUR VOICE

Advent 2, Year B: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

If we were to cherry-pick our First Reading and Gospel this morning as samples of the proclamation of Hebrew and Christian Scripture, we might quickly decide that prophecy stands at the heart of both traditions. Even from the seeming inertia of life in Babylon, Second Isaiah sees clearly the restoration of the Hebrew people in Jerusalem. Perhaps as never before envisioned, Isaiah has the exiles return to Jerusalem, heralding the intervention of the God who has finally vindicated them. It may be that because he is a prophet and is used to a hostile environment, Isaiah anticipates conflict for the people, either before or during the return to their homeland; in any event, God is credited in this prophecy as coming with might and a ruling arm. But there is also an image of God as the good shepherd who feeds the flock, gathers the lambs in his arms, and then gently leads home the mother sheep. It is a brave prophecy which, I expect, loses much of its initial sting in our hearing. The section describing people as grass that withers when the hot breath of the Lord blows upon it may refer to the weakening Babylonian Empire. If so, this comment would have been extremely offensive to the Babylonians. But Isaiah has no difficulty finding his voice. His gift is in knowing the God of the ancestors as a God of justice, and then proclaiming this same God as present and active and able to address the present suffering.

In today's Gospel, the message of John the Baptist also stings, but again, not as much in our ears as in those of the religious authorities in Jerusalem at the time. John appeals directly to the ordinary people to renew their covenant with God through his baptism ritual. Mark tells his readers that John's baptism is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, repentance and forgiveness for having broken the covenantal laws. Mark's description of John and his ministry suggests, especially in all the wilderness imagery, that there is a measure of captivity in how faith in God is being practised. As in the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 40, a vision of release from captivity is proffered, perhaps through the covenant renewal John's ministry seeks to accomplish, or perhaps through Jesus, the one John proclaims as more powerful. Hindsight would lead us to see the similarity in the ministry of the two men, neither of whom had difficulty finding their voice.

I love this Sunday in our three-year cycle of readings because these two passages from Isaiah and Mark remind us of the tradition of prophecy the church has received. Our track record in honoring the tradition over the past two thousand years has not been stellar: we have certainly had our moments, but more often than not the people of God in Christ Jesus are inappropriately quiet. Especially in these days when we in Canada are aware of how fragile the institutional church is and how all churches, save the Roman Catholic Church have lost their voice in public discourse (which to be translated is "the media"), we fail to risk ourselves in the tradition of Isaiah, John, and Jesus. Our God is still the God of justice, but the church's call for justice is faint. We need not only to remember the legacy of Isaiah and John the Baptist and find again our voice, we also need to connect with the issues of our day in more than a superficial way. We need to strive for authentic Christianity, practical Christianity, especially when we find the art and beauty of worship and the gifts of Christian community so attractive. It is taking our faith to the streets honours the prophetic tradition and proclaims our God as the God of justice.

While in Scotland last summer, I read a new biography of the Rev. Dr. Lois Wilson, former Moderator of the United Church of Canada. Throughout her long and distinguished ministry, she visited Christians and Christian communities throughout the Developing World, and was sickened by the instruments of oppression that are used by governments and international business interests, often in partnership. She visited South Korea before the fall of the Communist regime there in the 1980's, meeting survivors of the Kwangju Massacre. She visited India and later witnessed the ministry of Mother Teresa and the Sisters of Mercy in Calcutta. She visited Chile during the Pinochet years when children and often their fathers were disappeared, leaving the women of that country, the Mothers of the May Square, bereaved and abandoned. She visited South Africa to discover first-hand the churches who were resisting Apartheid, gave them money from the United Church of Canada, and made connections with the people and their leaders. She then returned to Canada and succeeded in having the Canadian Council of Churches lobby our federal government to impose economic sanctions on South Africa, one of the most persuasive tools used internationally in eventually bringing Apartheid to an end.

Lois, who is arguably one of the most successful church leaders of the 20th century, having not only headed Canada's largest Protestant denomination, but also the Canadian Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, is painfully aware of how she and the whole Christian community *fail* to raise up gospel love, gospel justice, gospel activism, and yes, gospel peace for the healing of the world; how we fail to find our voice in the board rooms, parliaments, and other centres of power in our world.

It is ironic that one whose voice has been so strong during her lifetime for the cause of justice in our world is so conscious of our shortcomings as the people of God in Christ Jesus. But not keeping a safe distance from human suffering and need may be the reason both for Lois's activism and for her disappointment that the church is not more engaged in doing justice.

There was a good news story in the Waterloo Region Record, this past Thursday. Perhaps you saw it. Trinity United Church, a congregation both our organist, Sheryl Loeffler, and I have known well over our years in this community – Sheryl was Director of Music at Trinity earlier in her career as a church musician – Trinity is reinventing itself, not to survive, but to re-establish its connection with the downtown community that will accomplish a measure of justice – just how much will be determined over time – but also to remain connected with the life of the city. The story says that Trinity is embarking on a \$40 million development which will have at least one 20-storey condo tower. It has a hectare of land in a prime downtown location, and an impossible-to-maintain building erected in 1905. In the present-day vernacular, it is a "waste of space". But the church is not a building, and the people of Trinity have known that for a long time: for as long as I've known it, the congregation has been on the cutting edge of the social gospel, and always believed in taking their faith to the streets. Now they are doing it again, and in a far more literal way than ever before.

To accomplish the redevelopment, they will transfer ownership of their property to the developer who, in exchange will build a flexible church and community space for the congregation who will become one of the building's condo owners. And the plan is to build small units suitable for one or two people. The units will be modest and relatively affordable, in keeping with the church's social mission.

As you may be aware, our Christ Church Bylaws Task Force has asked all our committees and subcommittees of late to restate their mandate for pending bylaw revisions. It has been an interesting exercise, and our Outreach Committee took the opportunity to include in its renewed mandate a statement attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. It reads, "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words."

On this Sunday that urges the church – that urges *our* church to find its prophetic voice, we might think of Francis's statement and of the way Trinity United Church has found its voice. We might think of Lois Wilson and her feet-on-the-ground theology that has kept her faith on the streets. Finding our voice is not consonant with keeping a safe distance from the world around us.