

Christ Episcopal Church
 Dayton, Ohio
 Second Sunday after the Epiphany/MLK Weekend
 January 15, 2012

A Prophet, as the text says, will make our ears burn—he or she will make us mad, or drive us to our knees.

Samuel was a prophet in Israel. His calling to be a prophet is described in today's reading from the *First Book of Samuel* in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Samuel's mother, Hannah, had been barren. She would go each year with her husband, Elkanah, to the holy site at Shiloh to make sacrifice to God. On one of these visits she spoke with the priest, Eli, and promised that if she should have a son, she would dedicate him to the LORD's service. It came to pass that Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to Samuel. True to her word, she took the young boy to Eli to serve in the LORD at Shiloh.

The other background to this story is told in the previous chapter:

Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people. When anyone offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, and he would thrust it into the pan, or kettle, or cauldron, or pot; all that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the one who was sacrificing, 'Give meat for the priest to roast; for he will not accept boiled meat from you, but only raw.' And if the man said to him, 'Let them burn the fat first, and then take whatever you wish', he would say, 'No, you must give it now; if not, I will take it by force.' Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the Lord; for they treated the offerings of the Lord with contempt.

Now Eli was very old. He heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. He said to them, 'Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people But they would not listen to the voice of their father¹

We come now to the story told in today's reading where Samuel was called three times and rushed to old Eli, saying, "Here I am, for you called me." And each time Eli said that he didn't call, and told Samuel to go back to sleep. Finally, Eli realized that

¹ I Samuel 2:12-17, 22-23, 25

it was the Lord who was calling Samuel, and instructed him that the next time he should say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Then God told Samuel how he would punish Eli’s sons for their blasphemy and Eli himself for not restraining them. In the morning, Eli demanded to know what God said, and, though he was afraid, Samuel told him everything.

Here we have the classic description of a prophet as one who speaks for God. In almost every case, the prophets saw visions or heard voices or dreamed dreams in which God called them to ministries of prophesy: to speak the Lord’s word. Too often we think of a prophet as a fortune-teller or predictor of future events. Sometimes they did foretell—but the primary role of the prophet was to speak God’s word.

Moses at the Burning Bush that was not consumed was told: “Tell ole Pharaoh to let my people go. Tell him that Yahweh, the LORD, has sent you.”

The Word of God most commonly spoken by the great Hebrew prophets was a word of warning to those who abused their power, wealth and privilege—who made life more difficult for the weak, the nothings, and the nobodies—who, like Eli’s sons, looked out for themselves by stealing the sacrifices of the people and raping the women who had come to serve at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

Elijah prophesied in Israel in the time of King Ahab and his evil wife, Jezebel. Ahab referred to Elijah as “You troubler of Israel.” Elijah replied:

*I have not troubled Israel ; but you have, and your father’s house,
because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed
the Ba’als (followed other Gods).²*

Amos—

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion,

*Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
But you have turned justice into poison
and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood.³*

² I Kings 18:17-18

³ Amos 6:1, 4-7, 12b

Amos solution? His words were burned into America's conscience from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963:

*Let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*⁴

This weekend we remember the work of another of God's great prophets, Martin Luther King, Jr. In the same mold as the biblical prophets of old, King held up the will of God for justice and righteousness (along with the U.S. Constitution as amended) and laid them alongside Jim Crow and all the legal forms of discrimination . . . helping the nation and the world to see just how wrong they were . . . not justifiable in scripture, in the best intentions of the republic, or in simple human conscience.

King called not only for racial justice and equality, but for care for the poor, the laborer, and the folk on the bottom of the pile of power, privilege and wealth. Shortly before his tragic assassination, he also called out our over-dependence on arms and military might to solve the world's problems, reminding us of the words of Jesus: "Put the sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."⁵

Sadly, we have not heeded the prophets.

- We are a nation that is almost continuously at war. One need only look at the walls of the church to be reminded of its cost.
- We have dismantled the safety net for millions of men, women, children and senior citizens. The gap between rich and poor grows every year. Twenty years ago the wealth of the average white family was seven times that of the average African-American family. Today it is twenty times greater.
- Jim Crow has been resurrected through the "War on Drugs, decimating communities of color . . . in the current era it is no longer permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. Yet it's perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. The old forms of discrimination—in employment, housing, education, and public benefits; denial of the right to vote; and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal once you are labeled a felon."⁶
- A project at The University of Toledo Law School has mapped hundreds upon hundreds of laws in Ohio (state and local laws) that continue to provide collateral sanctions that apply to felons long after they've served their time, regardless of their crimes or how long ago they were committed.

⁴ Amos 5:24

⁵ Matthew 26:52

⁶ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*, The New Press: New York, 2010, from the dust jacket.

- A felon cannot obtain a license to cut hair in Ohio. In Cincinnati, he or she cannot work in a hospital, even as a janitor.

As we stand before the prophets, who hold up before us the commandments of God, we feel our ears burn, and we are judged. The only faithful response is to bow our heads, confess our sinfulness, and to repent. To repent is to turn around, to reform our ways of thinking and of behaving. Let us seek to mold our being and our world in keeping with the will of God . . . “where justice, indeed rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

Let us pray.

Lord, give us a bold love for you. In our prayers, give us a willingness to ask you for big gifts, not small ones, gifts like peace, love, and justice. In our lives, inflame our desires for more abundant life, life lived in your light. In our discipleship, tempt us to try large tasks, great ventures, and remarkable feats. Change our insipid watered-down faith into the bubbling, deep wine of faithful discipleship. For your glory's sake, we pray. Amen.