

***A Prophet Among Them
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
July 4, 2021 Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Independence Day,
First Sunday in the Sanctuary after Fifteen Pandemic Months
Psalm 122:1-2, 6, 8; from Ezekiel 2:1-5, 33:7; Mark 6:1-8, 12-13***

I groaned when I saw the passages from Ezekiel and Mark in the worldwide lectionary for today. They were not the celebratory messages of pure joy I had in mind. Then I began to feel the Spirit at work, and I came around to thinking they were just right.

It is a tremendous joy to be able to worship in the sanctuary again, and a big part of our celebration is that this congregation has so often fulfilled the calling that God gave to Ezekiel and that Jesus gives to his followers.

“So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.”

“Whether they hear or refuse to hear...they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.”

Some of the church people in this town fought for freedom and democracy in the American Revolution, and afterward some of the church people helped heal the divisions caused in Strafford by that war.

The ethical vision and passion for goodness that Justin Morrill brought to our nation was informed by his involvement with this church. Many young men raised under this steeple went off to free slaves in the Civil War.

The upper and lower villages of Strafford did not always get along. The vision of a united church helped bridge differences and unite the town in 1967. Members of this congregation spoke prophetically against nuclear weapons in the 1980s and tried to offer asylum to refugees from right wing death squads in Central America. The prophetic voice of the Rev. William Sloane Coffin rang out from this pulpit, and in the past four years this congregation has helped organize local efforts to fight racism and climate change.

We have worked as a force of compassion and healing. Through our Mission Committee we have donated generously to feed the hungry and care for refugees and provide health care to children here and around the world. Our Deacons Fund has helped many people through hard

times in the Strafford area. Members of our congregation reached out to townspeople who were isolated during the pandemic.

Whether people have heard or not, they know that this church has been a prophet among them. They know that the Spirit of Christ-like love has been at work here. We can find reason to celebrate in today's scripture passages by looking at what we have done.

On the other hand, we can feel discomfort, too, because as we look at the state of our democracy on this 4th of July, and as we look at the condition of the earth as we enter back into this beloved, beautiful sanctuary, we see that God needs a prophetic voice from the church now more than ever.

“So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel...whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.”

Now that we are here together as one, both in person and by Zoom, what is God saying to us?

Our Heartfulness Contemplative Training Circle practices a kind of prayer that opens us to hear the Spirit speak within and around us. A member of our Heartfulness Circle attends by Zoom from British Columbia. Usually we see a sparkling Pacific bay behind her, but last summer she appeared shrouded in thick, sickly smoke from west coast wildfires. This Thursday she reported on the deadly heat and violent thunderstorms that have sparked wildfires near her.

We talked in the Circle about what we could do to help the earth. We confessed that when we look at the massive scale of problems we can doubt that one person or one small church can make a difference. But then a member of the Heartfulness Circle remembered arguing years ago with Bill Coffin about the futility of working for change. Bill said it is not about being successful, it is about being faithful.

Ezekiel said, “whether they hear or refuse to hear...they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.” Jesus was rejected at home and in Jerusalem, he prepared his followers to be rejected, and yet he kept teaching and healing and working for justice, and he keeps sending us out to do the same.

It is not about success, it is about being faithful—and faithful to what? To the greatest force in the universe. We can have faith that the Spirit that inspired humanity to evolve toward democracy will work through us to preserve democracy. We can have faith that the Spirit that

created life on earth will help us evolve to the oneness and harmony with the earth that we need in order to survive.

Jesus worked miracles, and he expected his followers would do the same. The good news is that we do not have to be talented or trained, we do not have to be young and healthy, all we have to do is show up and open to the Spirit, ready to keep listening together until we discern the next step on the path ahead.

And now we *can* show up in this sanctuary that holds the spirits of all the prophets and saints who have come before us. We are gathered at a turning point of history, and if we do our part, if we let the Spirit move us, then generations to come will look back and be inspired in their own challenges, saying “There was a prophet among us, and if they could do it then, we can do it now.”

So what specifically can we do? Sitting with that question is the first thing we can do, living into it fully, acknowledging our feelings about the changes taking place, the grief or fear or anger or sadness that all prophets feel when they realize that God is calling them to confront another seemingly impossible situation.

John Milton wrote, “They also serve who only stand and wait.” He said it full of frustration and grief when blindness made him feel useless, but he said it also in faith that God would give him a way to serve if he waited, which turned out to be *Paradise Lost* and some of the greatest poetry of all time.

Faithfulness to the question, readiness for the Spirit’s guidance and power—these, too, are prophetic actions, and they open us to other feelings, like the gratitude and peace and joy that we find in God’s creation or in the children whose world we need to save, or in our ability to be together in this sanctuary, loving one another and serving together, come what may.

Let us pray in silence, opening our hearts wide to the Spirit to receive its comfort, guidance and power...