

ST. BARTHOLOMEW’S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

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Scripture: 1 Kings 18-19; Jeremiah 17:5-10

THE “CALLED OUT ONES”

As many of us know, the most troubling aspect of the new reproductive law passed by the New York State Government is that it redefines personhood. According to our state legislators, a person is someone outside the womb and breathing. Such a redefinition raises serious issues not only as it pertains to right to have an abortion, but ultimately to the meaning and purpose of life itself.

The new law is supposedly to increase the health and well-being of the mother, and some would contend to children as well, in that the merciful option is to end a baby’s life in the womb if the mother’s health is at risk. The problem of course is that in an attempt to alleviate suffering and to provide a better choice for the mother, it creates other problems – what about the rights of a wanted child who is killed while in the mother’s womb? And what about the rights of the unwanted children in the womb who although they may cause a threat to the mother’s health, to what degree would this warrant his or her termination?

Now when lawmakers make laws that are unconstitutional, there is recourse – the courts and the people. When lawmakers enact laws that are evil, there is recourse! The Church, the Body of Christ. We literally are the people of God. We are the “called-out ones” assembled together in the name of Christ as One Body – that is literally what “church” (*ekklesia*) means – called out by God together in Christ to then go back into the world *together* to be the light of Christ – to literally be like Christ in our generation.

And this Body of Christ has as its forerunner the people of Israel. They were the first ones to be given the covenants of God that would lead to the coming of the Messiah, the Christ – who we know to be Jesus.

THE THREE PILLARS OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

And before the coming of Jesus, there were three main pillars of society that guided the people of God – the King and His throne – maintaining civil order, enforcing the laws of society, and protecting the community from outside threats; the second was the priesthood – the priests were mediators – standing before God and man – representing the people before God and representing God before the people and leading the people in the worship of the Lord; but then there was a third pillar – the prophets – they declared the Word of God, both what God was telling the people to do in the here and now as well as well as what God promised to do in the future; but they also would at times confront the King and His court, the Priests, and the People if they were not following God’s law faithfully or making laws that contradicted God’s law. The message of the Prophets was to call God’s people and the world to repentance – to turn away from self and back to God in the case of the people of God and turn to God for the first time in the case of those who were never believers.

THE PLIGHT OF THE PROPHETS

Now of these three, who do you think suffered the most? The prophets! There is a reason Jesus said, *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!"*

Prophets have never been really popular and if they have their popularity is usually short lived. Think of John the Baptist; everyone was coming to see John but eventually his head ended up on the platter of King Herod's wife! Last week, we looked at the reigns of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and how their spirit is alive and well in America today. Who did God raise up to confront the King and the Queen? The prophet Elijah. We read in **1 Kings 18 and 19** how the prophet challenged King Ahab to send his false prophets to a prophetic duel: *"When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, 'Is this you, you troubler of Israel?' 18 He said, 'I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and you have followed the Baals. 'Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, together with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table.'" This confrontation led to the deaths of those false prophets after a supernatural display of God's almighty power.*

As a result we read in **I Kings 19:1-5, 9-18**, *"Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time.' 3 And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. 4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers.' 5 He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, 'Arise, eat.' Then he came there to a cave and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' 10 He said, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.'"*

11 So He said, 'Go forth and stand on the mountain before the LORD.' And behold, the LORD was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. 12 After the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. 13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' 14 Then he said, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.'"

15 The LORD said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; 16 and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint

king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. 17“It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. 18“Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

Notice that Elijah was always on the run. Even after declaring God’s Word and seeing the supernatural power of God displayed in wondrous ways, he retreated. A prophet’s job was never easy. We see another example in today’s Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah. Jeremiah was raised up to confront the Kings and priests of Judah after they had turned away from God’s Word. Like the northern kingdom of Israel they too engage in false worship and idolatry, sexual immorality, the practices of occult – witchcraft and communicating with the dead, and child sacrifice. Jeremiah preached a message of repentance and we read in Jeremiah that he too, lived on the run.

A TOUGH BUT TRUE MESSAGE

And why was there such opposition? Why is there always opposition to their message? God tells us in **Jeremiah 17:5-10**: *“Thus says the LORD, “Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from the Lord.⁶ “For he will be like a bush in the desert and will not see when prosperity comes, but will live in stony wastes in the wilderness, a land of salt without inhabitant.⁷ “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose trust is the Lord. ⁸ “For he will be like a tree planted by the water, That extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit.⁹ “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it? ¹⁰ “I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds.”*

Here we have a clear picture of what is at the heart of all evil and all problems. The heart of man! Notice the three characteristics of the heart of man – 1) He trusts in this world and its ways, 2) He trusts in his own strength – ie. ingenuity, wisdom, knowledge, and 3) He turns away from the Lord. Even when prosperity comes, that person will be in a spiritual wasteland. The Bible calls this the slavery to sin. Note the contrast with the person who trusts in the Lord and does not turn away from God but to God. He is likened to a tree in water that is expanding its roots and produces good fruit. This undoubtedly reflects spiritual growth and influence, as well as a strong faith and confidence. Notice that fear and anxiety will not be the norm for those who trust in the Lord. And in the midst of this contrast there is a warning – literally the heart of the problem is the heart! *“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?”* In other words, the spiritual battle going on in our world always originates in the heart. Ultimately a heart that is not grounded in God’s Word does not follow the Lord, and does not obey His Word will not only falter but will end up remaining under a curse. And if we are of the Lord and we turn away from Him, we will see things go downhill fast. It will be felt in the heart and then will be seen in the body – in our everyday life.. When the Lord says that *“I search the heart, I test the mind, to give according to each man according to his ways, according to the results of one’s*

deeds” – i.e. one’s actions, He simply is saying that the more you are walking with the Lord, the more things will click, and the more you stray away from the Lord, the more things will go awry.

I find it interesting that since Governor Cuomo has signed the new law, the state has just suffered a three-billion-dollar hole in its budget due to the number of folks leaving the state. This past week Amazon, despite the wooing of our governor, has backed out of building a new headquarters in New York City at a cost of 25,000 jobs. And in addition, Governor Cuomo’s approval rating is at 46%, the lowest since becoming governor 12 years ago.

JESUS IS OUR KING, PRIEST, AND PROPHET

We all know that Jesus came to demonstrate that He is the Son of God, God in human flesh. But He also came to show that He is the true King of Israel and also the entire world. He came to be both our High Priest and the Passover Lamb. And He came as a Prophet – to proclaim God’s Word and to call on all to repentance. In fact after reading the passage from Isaiah about the Lord *sending His messenger to preach the gospel to the poor and release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind*, Jesus said, *“Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown.”* (Lk. 4:18, 24) Do you remember how He began His ministry? *“Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!”*

It was this message that led to the most resistance to Jesus. Jesus said in **John 7:7**: *“...the world hates Me because I testify that its works are evil.”* It is this message of truth and a calling to repentance that causes the most resistance among those in this world. For if one does not recognize he or she is sick and spiritual blind without Christ, they can’t get the help they need. Recall what **Mk. 2:16-17** says, *“When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to His disciples, “Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?” 17 And hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”*

THE PROPHETIC WITNESS OF THE CHURCH

And so if we are to be like Christ, that means that we are to embody His ministry. And we do so by calling on people to follow Him as King of their lives, as Lord. His law, His ways are to be our standard for living. We call on people to worship the Father through the Son and by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Son of God is our High Priest and Passover Lamb. Otherwise Holy Communion would not be central to our worship. But there is also the Prophetic role of the Church. And that means confronting the government and our political leaders for when they do things contrary to God’s laws. That means maintaining a message of repentance both inside and outside the church. That means working together to be that prophetic witness to take on those things in society that are unjust, that enslave people, that present false choices for prosperity and the well-being of our citizens.

All of us have a prophetic role to play. We do so first by how we live our lives. If we are a disciple of Christ and we spend time with people, sooner or later they will and should recognize the difference.

6th Sunday after the Epiphany, February 17, 2019, Liturgical Year "C"

And the more we are in line with God's Word and His will, the more we are walking with Christ, the easier it will be to impact others for Christ.

We are not here to simply point the finger to what is wrong but to point to the One who has and does everything that is right. And we are to do this not only individually but collectively. That is why our ministry values of Belong, Equip and Reach are so important. We belong to one another in Christ; we are to be equipped to be like Christ; and then we are to go out into the world to demonstrate the truth and love of Christ. Therein lies the prophetic witness of the Church.

And as such, this corporate role and mission is not just for the local church. We must do it with other churches, and not just our particular denomination. We do it with churches of all denominations who understand what it means to know that Jesus Christ is Lord and what it means when we recognize we are under the authority of His Word.

That is how the prophetic voice of God can make the most difference in our world today - when we stand together with like-minded believers; standing for what is good, noble, true, and excellent. And I can't think of anything more good, noble, true, and excellent than the child in the womb, and the children born out of the womb. May this be the rekindling of a national movement of the Church, which not only stands for life the way God ordained it but calls on all to turn away from self and turn to the One True God who reveals Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ, our Lord! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!