

“Interpret This!”

Luke 12:49-56

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor
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“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

Prayer.

Prophecy is obvious when it is hindsighted.

I just finished reading the biography of Harry Truman, president of the United States from 1944 to 1952. He was president when the Marshall Plan was implemented to rebuild Europe after World War II, the Truman Doctrine was cast and NATO was created to stop Stalin and his Soviet aggression, when the Berlin airlift was flown to keep west Berlin free. Truman stood up to Joe McCarthy and his red scare, the Chinese and North Koreans by sending troops to Korea, and had the courage to fire one of the most popular generals in history, Douglas MacArthur.

As I read about each of these major incidences and decisions, it occurred to me how little I had previously understood this key era. When given the supporting information of what was happening in the larger world at that time, Truman's decisions became so much more clear. With hindsight, it is easy even for an amateur historian like myself to make sense of why Truman did what he did when he did it.

Prophecy is easy when it is nearsighted.

Driving west on 104 this past Friday evening one could see the clouds rising in the west, the flashes of lightening in the sky, even though we were still in sunshine. It was uncertain

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which was going to get to Wegman's first, the storm or our family.

"It really looks like it is going to blow," I commented. And blow it did, with rain coming down so hard Cynthia dropped Christian and me off at the door while she and Nick took a parking spot and rode out the worst of the rain.

Like Jesus points out in the Gospel lesson, with a little bit of experience and an eye to the sky, just about anyone can be an amateur prophet when it comes to weather forecasting.

But even this has its limits. "What's it going to do Tuesday morning?" demonstrates even how difficult this is simply by extending the range of our prophecy.

Prophecy becomes much more difficult when we become farsighted.

We become far less confident when we begin to look beyond the next moment, when we begin to look beyond mere forecasting the weather. Is this job ever going to come through? Will I ever be cured of this cancer? Will we ever have enough to pay for college? What should I do next?

When I completed seminary and was ordained by bishop Stith, I had developed a naive confidence about the future. I felt my call to ordained ministry was set for the next 40 years. I would be a parish pastor for five or ten years in each assignment, then move on to the next place the bishop wanted me to go. After six or seven parishes, I'd be all set for retirement ... to live happily ever after.

What I've come to learn is that life is a lot more complicated than that. Life is a lot more complicated even for those who appear to be confident about who they are, what they are doing, and where they are going. "Never underestimate the frailty of health" one mentor told me long ago. "Nothing like a good heart attack to change the complexion of your local parish." (Even as you gasp in disbelief, irony shows no favorites: he died of a heart attack while mowing his yard a few years later.)

How does one prophecy or interpret tomorrow?

The most elemental function of Christian prophecy is to recognize that tomorrow is in God's hands. We may be uncertain if that means that tomorrow is predestined, that is, already a divinely established fact that can not be changed OR if that means that no matter what happens God will have the appropriate response. Regardless of how we craft our theology, we get to the same place, and that is this: the future belongs to God.

This means we place our trust in God, and we stop trusting in our own abilities or resources to overcome future challenges. We place our trust in God to show us the way, to guide us in

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what we are to do, to provide for us when we are in need. Trust in God frees us from the burden of anxiety and uncertainty. It gives us the confidence to be the faithful disciples that Jesus called us to be.

We can, and should, prepare ourselves for tomorrow. We should lead our lives as if we are living our last moments. Get that degree. Go on that mission trip. Sit down and read the Bible cover to cover. Don't take your faith trajectory or your commitment to discipleship for granted. People that do are as bland as ketchup, when Jesus is calling us this morning to become hot, like Tabasco.

Which leads us to the second condition of Christian prophecy. Like Christ, the prophet is never satisfied with the status quo. The prophet always looks to the future and asks "What are the opportunities God is revealing to me today?"

The status quo is content to make this just one more year in the life of Zion. A life of faith becomes a rut we have to endure: just another year of teaching Sunday school, or, just another cycle in the Lectionary, or, time to start up just another year of choir.

Blast those "justs" with Christ's Tabasco! When we use the word "just" in the course of our prophecy, we are content to fail, to remain "just like we've always done it before," to justify our lack of creativity.

The prophet looks to the children and youth of our parish and asks, "What talents has God given us that we can put to use?" The prophet looks to the seniors of our parish and asks, "What can our aging adults teach us about Jesus Christ and living a life of faith over the course of the lifespan?" The prophet looks at what we have and searches the mind of God for what we are to become.

When we embrace the prophetic life, we welcome change; not for change sake, but for the sake that God is free to work through our openness to bring about his greater kingdom. We are prepared to give up a life of ketchup and to begin a life of Tabasco, a world of new opportunities God makes available to us.

Living a faithful, prophetic life is a life of confrontation. Most of us don't like confrontation. Most of us avoid confrontation. But take for a moment, a lesson from those few, difficult people we encounter in our lives, who thrive on confrontation. Those who embrace confrontation, who don't cower away from it, set the agenda. They define the battlefield. They create the conflict to bring about their larger agenda.

I'm not telling you to go out and become confrontational, just for the sake of being a pain. What our Gospel is telling us however, is that Jesus is teaching all those who would follow him, that a condition of discipleship is that it will bring conflict and confrontation into your

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life.

One can not encounter sin and accommodate it. We can't cradle it, we can't smooth it over and hope that it will correct itself or go away, and we can't slap a bandage on it and call it good. Sin is infectious; it causes death to tissue if left untreated. The only way to deal with sin in this world is to confront it directly, to look it dead in the eye, and to force it to turn away.

Now that's how you use Tabasco!

Finally, I would suggest that living the life Christ has called for us, to be faithful and prophetic at the same time, implies that we must recognize the fact that risk involved. Trusting in God is a risk filled adventure. Being unsatisfied with the status quo and being prepared to make changes in life is a risk filled adventure. Confronting sin in our lives, cutting it out, and making a new choice is a risk filled adventure.

Prophets are risk takers.

Taking risks doesn't mean that one is necessarily foolish. Risk is appropriate when one considers the facts, the evidence, the history, and uses these various sources of information to draw sound conclusions."If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen," Harry Truman was known to say on numerous occasions; meaning, of course, that if we are going to be in the kitchen, we must be prepared to take a little heat, we must cope with the additional risk, or else, leave it up to someone else who can.

When we are prophets for our living God we risk alienating our family, our friends, all those who are around us. We risk not being popular when we attempt to always do right, to always be faithful, to always follow Jesus Christ. We will confront neighbors who don't want to love us back, enemies who don't want to lay down their arms, devils whose only hope is persistence.

And that is the risk we face when we live the prophetic life.

Allow me to conclude with a warning: great responsibility is given the prophet, to use the power of confrontation and risk taking wisely, for Christ's purposes, and his purposes alone. There is great temptation that comes with this responsibility; temptation to become too prideful, too full of ourselves. Therefore, to prophecy, one must empty the self, assume complete humility and dependency upon Christ, and Christ alone.

My beloved, who ascribe to such attention and devotion as we do to family, consider the prophetic call of Christian discipleship. There will be times when Christ will divide father from son, daughter from mother, just as Jesus taught. It won't be for confrontation sake.

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Rather, God has greater plans, wider visions, expanded understanding of what tomorrow may hold.

Our hope, and our only hope, is to trust, to be faithful, to be prophetic - and to embrace the potential to which God is calling. The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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