

**MESSAGE**..... *Promised Land, Promised Time* .....Pastor Susan

The reading today is about a vision from a priest named Zechariah. This vision was of a great prophet coming soon. This amazing prophet, a prophet above all prophets, who points to the hope of the world, will in fact be Zechariah's son and they called him John the Baptist.

The idea of prophecy and prophets is important this time of year because our scriptures, both old and new, tell stories of various people prophesizing about how there is hope in this deep dark world. It is a very common theme that begins our Christian year – not with the Light actually breaking into the world, but with the hope that the Light is going to break into the world. That's what prophets do, they prepare us for what is to come, both if we heed their warning and if we ignore their warning.

So, what is a prophet? To start with, I will say what a prophet is NOT. A prophet is NOT a fortune teller. A prophet is NOT a person who can magically see the future in some miraculous way. A prophet is really just any old Joe, not particularly special, but one who has eyes that see the truth in their society and are bold enough to point to that truth. A dangerous act because more often than not the act of pointing to the truth results in imprisonment or even death.

As we enter into Part II of "We Make the Road by Walking," Brian McLaren reminds us that people who are truly alive, truly alive in their bodies and spirits, fully human and living the life that God intended them to live, those people have desires and hopes and dreams that are in sync with God. And those desires, hopes and dreams inspire **ACTION!**

This first Sunday of Advent, we lift up the blessing of Hope. Hope is what the prophets give us. They look around the world, they witness the ill behavior, the spiritual corruption, the moral decline, the selfish self-centered agendas, the fear that turns hearts into stone and they always say the same thing – "Repent, for the Kingdom is at hand." Now they all don't use those exact words, but that is always the message. "Stop doing what you're doing, turn to God and if you truly do that, eventually, all will be well."

In AA, we have a saying when someone contemplates picking up a drink. "Just one drink we think. It's Thanksgiving, we should toast to all our good fortune." When that thought crosses our minds, the first thing we're trained to do is call our sponsor and that sponsor will most likely prophetically say this – "play the tape." Play the tape means stop, think, remember what happens after that first drink. Pull out of your memory banks what that first toast leads to. A second toast. A third toast. And then we start the journey toward circling the drain again. "Play the tape all the way through" they say.

Playing the tape can be a tool for individuals but it is also a tool that prophets use to point out what's going to happen if we make certain choices. Prophets are not pulling these prophecies out of thin air – they rely on facts. They rely on truthful stories of human kind. They rely on recorded history. Those tapes. Prophets touch on our innate desires, our hopes and our dreams and then challenge us to act in ways that are consistent with those desires, hopes and

dreams. Play the tape, then as a well-informed person, knowing the pros and cons of our actions – we hopefully make good choices.

Prophets tell us that our hearts of stone will become hearts of flesh.

They tell us that the spirit of the Lord will be poured out on all humanity.

They tell us that justice will roll down like a river.

They tell us that the beastlike empires of violence will be overcome by a simple unarmed human.

But these prophets are very, very clear that these things are not just going to magically happen someday. They consistently insist that we have to **DO SOMETHING** if we want these things to materialize.

I think one of the greatest mistakes religious people make is that they have the tendency to sit back and say, “God’s got this,” and live in this passive, complacent place that in no way at all will ever, ever bring the gospel to others. NOOOOOO say the prophets! God’s desires, God’s hopes, God’s dreams will be done when and only when **we** take action.

My friends, I don’t have to say it, you know as well as I do that our nation and world is in one of those dark times. The prophetic voice absolutely must, without condition, rise out of the Church. As Christ followers, we have an Advent responsibility! Christ cannot be seen as the Light of the world until we recognize the darkness in the world. And so, if the savior of the world is to come, we absolutely must not dodge the truth. Even if it offends, our responsibility as followers of Jesus is to point to AND DO SOMETHING, ANYTHING:

- About the economic injustices that surround us,
- about the lack of human rights and equality for all,
- about the climate emergency that will change everything as we know it,
- about the callous agendas where we ignore the plight of our brothers and sisters in need who are running from violence and utter despair,
- about the fears that shape some of our nation’s policies to be nothing more than evil.

Throughout history, when times got bad, you could hear the prophets cry out, lament, and mourn the direction humans take. Those prophets continue to cry out. They insist...

- Today is **not** the time to be luke-warm. Today is the time to speak truth to power.
- Today is **not** the time to be afraid of offending. Today is the time to challenge the comfortable and make them uncomfortable.
- Today is **not** the time to sing “Jesus loves me” and leave it at that. Today is the time to be like Zechariah’s son, John the Baptist, and point to the Hope of the world.

And the hope of the world comes in a man named Jesus who was also a prophet. And he, like all the other prophets before him, offered the same exact message to the people – **repent, for**

the kingdom of God is at hand. The prophet Jesus pointed to God's hopes, desires and dreams and made us realize that at our core, when stripped of our ego and selfish agendas, we actually share those same values with God. The prophet Jesus showed us how to sacrifice ourselves so that our bodies, our lives will bring the Light and Love of Christ into our small corner of the universe. It is this gift of Hope that comes from God, that continues to form, reform and transform the world into the Kingdom we all long for. Let us all be the hope of the world this Advent.