

## New Testament Prophecy

“Eventually, the world will know they’ve met a prophet – a whole community of prophets.”

This is the last line of the sermon delivered by the Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori to the Episcopal Church’s General Convention in 2012. It’s my most ardent desire to see that come to pass, but the notion of what it means to be a prophet must expand considerably if we are going to reach that summit.

Presiding Bishop Schori gets much right in her address to Convention.

“Prophets speak and act for God, with spoken and incarnate words of strength, hope, and challenge.” Most of that is spot on, but it is still based on the Old Testament model of prophecy. We live under a New Covenant, and under that New Covenant, prophecy’s character changes.

On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

(1 Corinthians 14:3 ESV)

There is a subtle but radical difference between the two.

Old Testament prophecy spoke to a people whose primary means of being in relationship to God was through Law. Relationship was grounded in our behavior. One changed relationship by changing behavior, and this is still the focus of the kind of prophecy the presiding bishop speaks about. “Prophetic words of comfort or challenge urge a kind of frontier work – getting across the fence between fear and possibility, reconciling division, transforming injustice, urging the lost onto the road home.”

Under the Old Covenant, that would have been true, but under the New Covenant, prophecy often *results in* all those things that were mentioned, but it doesn’t focus on the act. It focuses on the identity and calling of the individual or people-group to whom the prophecy is given. It *inspires action*, it doesn’t call for it.

This is why the only real prophet of the modern day, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is so different from most of our “prophetic” voices of the present. Yes, he advocated for change, but what moved us were not those plans but his visions, his dreams. He was driven by a vision of a reconciled country, a reconciled world, and he gave voice to that

dream of God, and it in-spired us. It breathed spirit in where there hadn't been any, or it had become dormant. His *dreams* galvanized a country, not his legislative agenda.

Similarly, we are invited as partners with God in the work of reconciliation to speak that into being in the hearts of people imprisoned by division and fear. Prophecy is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and we are urged by Paul to learn and employ this gift. "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy." (1 Corinthians 14:1 ESV) This involves a kind of knowledge of the person or people's circumstances that can only be given by God, and an ability to hear God's heart for them, and to speak that into being for them, to name that perfected reality that already exists in the heart of God and allow that dream to draw folks forward.

This doesn't mean that our hearts don't break for those suffering under injustice. Indeed, the more sensitive we become to the heart of the one Jesus called "Abba," the more likely we are to be drawn into service ourselves, but what we do as prophets is speak the Father's love even for the most hardened, because it is God's *kindness* that leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4) not His wrath. Legislation changes behavior, but it doesn't change hearts. If Dr. King could see the state of our country today, the persistence of racism and all kinds of prejudice among us, I suspect that his heart would break over the failure of our changed laws to change hearts. Yes, things are better, at least for some, but the mothers of color in my congregation still fear for their sons when they send them out on the streets of Long Island, only because of the color of their skin.

It's fitting that our Gospel text for this week is about the death of John the Baptist. He was the greatest of all the prophets of the Old Testament. Jesus said of him, "I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John." (Luke 7:28 ESV) But He went on in the last phrase of the same verse to say, "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

The Baptist is dead. God needs a new breed of prophets to rise up and draw men and women around the world into the Kingdom with His vision of them, for them.