

Sermon Title: Truth-telling in the Empire

**1 Kings 22:1-18 (NRSV)**

For three years Aram and Israel continued without war. <sup>2</sup>But in the third year King Jehoshaphat of Judah came down to the king of Israel. <sup>3</sup>The king of Israel said to his servants, ‘Do you know that Ramoth-gilead belongs to us, yet we are doing nothing to take it out of the hand of the king of Aram?’ <sup>4</sup>He said to Jehoshaphat, ‘Will you go with me to battle at Ramoth-gilead?’ Jehoshaphat replied to the king of Israel, ‘I am as you are; my people are your people, my horses are your horses.’

<sup>5</sup> But Jehoshaphat also said to the king of Israel, ‘Inquire first for the word of the Lord.’ <sup>6</sup>Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred of them, and said to them, ‘Shall I go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I refrain?’ They said, ‘Go up; for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king.’ <sup>7</sup>But Jehoshaphat said, ‘Is there no other prophet of the Lord here of whom we should inquire?’ <sup>8</sup>The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, ‘There is still one other by whom we may inquire of the Lord, Micaiah son of Imlah; but I hate him, for he never prophesies anything favorable about me, but only disaster.’ Jehoshaphat said, ‘Let the king not say such a thing.’ <sup>9</sup>Then the king of Israel summoned an officer and said, ‘Bring quickly Micaiah son of Imlah.’ <sup>12</sup>All the (other) prophets were prophesying the same and saying, ‘Go up to Ramoth-gilead and triumph; the Lord will give it into the hand of the king.’

<sup>13</sup> The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him, ‘Look, the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king; let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably.’ <sup>14</sup>But Micaiah said, ‘As the Lord lives, whatever the Lord says to me, that I will speak.’

<sup>15</sup> When he had come to the king, the king said to him, ‘Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we refrain?’ He answered him, ‘Go up and triumph; the Lord will give it into the hand of the king.’ <sup>16</sup>But the king said to him, ‘How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?’ <sup>17</sup>Then Micaiah said, ‘I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd; and the Lord said, “These have no master; let each one go home in peace.”’ <sup>18</sup>The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, ‘Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy anything favorable about me, but only disaster?’

When considering faith in the midst of a world that feels chaotic, we often turn to the Biblical prophets, for they too lived in troubling times and believed their own historical situations to be a circumstance of crisis. The prophets do not speak universal truths, they do not utter nice inspirational quotes that we might hang on our living room walls – they speak concretely to their own particular time, place and circumstance.

In the history of Israel (of the Old Testament) the prophets come into being alongside the emergence of a king. Before Israel has a king, there are not prophets – there are leaders like Moses and Miriam; there are Judges like Deborah and Gideon who help lead the people out of a particular crisis and arbitrate disputes. But it is only when a king is crowned, that a prophet is now needed – alongside the emergence of a position of great Royal power, is apparently the need for someone of God to speak truth to that power. In the Old Testament it is Samuel who anoints Saul as the first king of Israel, and then Samuel is thrust into the role of being the first prophet – the first whose task is to keep someone with supreme power and wealth aligned with the ways of God's kingdom.

Walter Brueggemann says that with the coming of the king comes the *Royal Consciousness*<sup>1</sup> – the view from the top, the consciousness of those who are removed from the everyday lives of the working class and the marginalized; the consciousness of those who are mostly interested in maintaining the present reality and their own power. This is seen first in Pharaoh, the king of Egypt who builds his kingdom through the work of slaves – a king so concerned with maintaining his power that he orders all male Hebrew children killed so that they

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<sup>1</sup> The ideas of Royal Consciousness and Prophetic Imagination come from Walter Brueggemann's book, *The Prophetic Imagination*.

will not one day be too numerous and revolt against their slave master. It is fear of Royal Power being wielded in such ways that keeps Israel from having a king for many generations.

And so when a king is finally crowned, so too emerges the prophet – the prophets who are armed only with what Brueggemann calls, *The Prophetic Imagination*. One who knows the realities and pains of those who live at the margins because they too live there (often the prophet is an outsider); one who speaks the word of God because they commune with God and love God; one who speaks of justice, compassion, and peace because they are not concerned with maintaining the present reality but with the ways of the kingdom of God.

And so we begin our series on “faith in the midst of chaos” by looking to the prophets, to the ways they speak the word of God that has been given to them.

Our scripture this morning is likely not a familiar story to most of us, though the general idea of the story is quite a common one – one prophet, standing alone with the message God has given them – one prophet speaking against the king – one prophet, speaking against other prophets who are saying only what the king wants to hear. It is a story that continues to this day for those in power.

There had been peace in Israel for three years, but eventually Ahab – who according to the Old Testament was one of the Israel’s most unfaithful kings – wants some disputed land back; land he believes to be Israel’s and worth fighting for. He asks his ally to the south, King Jehoshaphat if he will join him in this act of war. King Jehoshaphat says of course, we are like one – my horses

are your horses, my soldiers, your soldiers. But, Jehoshaphat wants to do his due diligence and ask the prophets before rushing into battle. Which is good thinking if you believe in “Just War Theory”, as hopefully the High School Sunday School class will remember, one of the elements of a “Just War” is to have a reasonable chance of success. Otherwise, you just have death and carnage without changing the situation. So, they consult their prophets on whether or not they will be victorious if they take up arms.

During the times of the kings of Israel, there were professional prophets – a group of prophets who were paid to prophesy to the king – in some ways they serve as the kings spiritual advisors, only in many cases this involved determining the future with a word from God. Some of these prophets sought to be faithful to God, but it seems like most stick with tell the king whatever will make the king happy – their livelihood and probably their lives, depended on it. We hear warnings from the Biblical prophets about these false prophets who “speak smooth things.” The prophet Micah says, “Of you house of Jacob, your priests teach for a price and your prophets give oracles for money.” These professional prophets, often tell the king what the king wants to hear – they say the easy thing, the popular thing. Another reminder to you all that you should be wary of us clergy who are getting paid to say certain things – it is hard to be prophetic when your job depends on not rocking the boat too much.

And in our scripture this morning, we are told there are about 400 of these professional prophets who King Ahab & King Jehoshaphat inquire as to whether or not they should go to war. Each prophet agrees, all 400 of them, “Go for it my king, God will give you victory!” But for some reason King Jehoshaphat is not fully convinced, so he asks Ahab, “are you sure this is everyone, is there not any other prophets we should double-check with?”

Ahab reluctantly says, that there is, but we don't want to ask him because he never has anything good to say – “I hate him” reports the king, “for he only prophesies disaster.” Or, we might say, because he is the only one who challenges me with the truth. But Jehoshaphat insists, and so a messenger is sent to bring the prophet Micaiah (not to be confused with the later prophet Micah), one of the disciples of the prophet Elijah. When the messenger gets to Micaiah he urges him, “look, all the rest of us told the king what he wanted to hear, so just make it easy on all of us and say the same thing.” But Micaiah, as a true prophet of God's says, “whatever the Lord says to me, that I will speak.”

And so Micaiah tells Ahab and Jehoshaphat what he has seen, that going into battle will mean destruction and death for them and their people. To which Ahab says, “Didn't I tell you that he never has anything good to say!” And he throws the prophet in jail, to stay there until at least the battle is over.

But, as the story continues, the king must have been a bit concerned over the words of the prophet for Ahab disguises himself as a regular soldier in battle rather than leading his troops openly as their king. However, Ahab is fatally struck by a randomly shot arrow. Meaning of course that the words of the prophet were true, and the 400 professional prophets who predicted an easy victory – they were simply saying what the king wanted to hear.

This is one of the choices we all have to face, whether we will go along with the majority opinion, with the dominant way of thinking and being, or whether we will be agents of the *Prophetic Vision* – to be instruments of an alternative consciousness, even if it is not what people want to hear.

The royal consciousness, says Walter Brueggemann, leads people to numbness – to believe that the current reality is the only way things can be; it leads people to despair about the power of new life and the possibility for transformation – that nothing can really be changed or renewed in any significant way. It is the task of prophetic imagination and ministry to bring people to engage the promise of newness that is at work in our history with God. Brueggemann offers three humble tasks for evoking our prophetic imaginations as God’s people<sup>2</sup>.

**1. The proper language for the prophet in cutting through numbness and denial is the language of grief.**

Grief is the language that can cut through ideology and complacency – it stirs us to listen. This is why when you are trained to lobby those in power, you are usually told to tell stories – not to battle ideology, argue politics, or try to combat with facts. To tell stories. Personal stories that will hopefully move underneath ideological differences and stir the person sitting across from you.

A few years ago I was visiting with one of our Congressman about immigration reform, I was there with a college student who was a US citizen but whose parents were undocumented. She began to tell part of her story, of the fear her family lived in and the daily difficulties of growing up with undocumented parents. Midway through her story, the Congressman stopped her and said, “Look, I have heard all these stories before.” He did not want to hear her grief for it

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<sup>2</sup> These three humble tasks for prophetic imagination also come from Brueggemann’s work, *The Prophetic Imagination*.

cuts through ideology. He did not want to hear the grief that comes from some of the legislation that he is working on or proposing. It is too hard to hear.

This is part of why the teenagers who were part of the Parkland shooting have become prophets, they are speaking the language of their own grief and pain. The reality of the pain they have gone through cannot be denied. It can be ignored. We can hope they go away. But when they speak of their grief, we are forced to face what we do not want to see, we are forced to ask if there is something we could have done to be complicit in their grief.

Of the prophets, Brueggemann says, “They cannot cry enough. More tears need to be cried than their eyes will permit.”

And so, if you find yourself grieving at some of the realities of our world – if you find yourself lamenting or feeling pain – do not despair, do not turn away from or deny your grief, but know that this is part of your prophetic calling – to be moved beyond numbness by grief, this is the stirring of the prophets.

## **2. To know that our speech shapes consciousness and defines reality.**

While the prophets are immersed in public crises, they rarely urge specific policy. Nor are they, to my dismay, social activists. They are most characteristically “utterers,” they speak, they use poetry, images and metaphors that aim to disrupt, destabilize, and invite to alternative perceptions of reality.

So, like the prophets before us – let us believe that our words, our language, and our phrases help to shape consciousness and define the reality we live in. Not overnight, but slowly, over time.

- We shape reality when we say, “homeless citizen” rather than “bum” or “hobo” or even simply say “Homeless person.” When we say “homeless citizen” we claim that they are a person with rights who deserves honor and consideration.
- We shape consciousness when we say that someone is “undocumented” instead of “illegal.”
- We shape reality when we call God “Him” or “Father”, or “Creator” or “Mother” or “Spirit.” Our chosen title or metaphor shapes reality over time. Not overnight, but overtime.
- We shape consciousness when we speak about those who live in North Korea and Iran. Do we call them enemy? Terrorist? Extremist? Hater of our Freedom? Or do we call them people, Iranians. North Koreans. Sisters and Brothers. People whose lives matter as much as our own lives.

About five months ago, before the House of Representatives voted on the new tax plan, the House chaplain, Rev. Patrick Conroy, a Jesuit priest who has served seven years since being appointed by John Boehner, prayed as part of the opening of the session – his prayer included these words:

“May all members be mindful that the institutions and structures of our great nation guarantee the opportunities that have allowed some to achieve great success, while others continue to struggle.” And, he continued, “May their efforts these days guarantee that there are not winners and losers under new tax laws, but benefits balanced and shared by all Americans.”

A few days later a staffer came to him and told him that some were upset with his prayer and that he needed to be careful to stay out of politics. But, apparently, the Rev. Conroy felt that he must say smooth things, but “whatever the Lord says to me, I will speak.” For this Jesuit priest, that meant the teachings of Jesus. Over the five months after his reprimand, he continued to pray at the beginning of House sessions – not trying to be political, but trying to pray by some of the teachings of Jesus in that intimidating house of power. A task that I most certainly would not want.

He prayed to God that lawmakers would help “the least among us.”

That God would help them to follow the example of St. Nicholas, “who fed the hungry, brought hope to the imprisoned, and gave comfort to the lost.”

He asked God to help these members of Congress “to serve other people in their need” and urged them “to pray for the unemployed and those who work but still struggle to make ends meet.”

After an immigration deal collapsed, he urged “those who possess power here in Washington be mindful of those whom they represent who possess little or no power.”

He prayed for lawmakers to be “free of all prejudice” and, after the Parkland, Fla., school shooting, to “fulfill the hopes of those who long for peace and security for their children.”

He prayed for “peace and reconciliation where those virtues are so sorely needed.” And he prayed that those in the People’s House might rise above “self-interest” and “immediate political wins” in order to promote “justice, equity and truth.”

This week, Rev. Conroy was asked to resign his position as House Chaplain. Perhaps his prayers were beginning to shape and form consciousness in ways that the Royal Consciousness did not

want. Perhaps the words of his prayers were working to define reality in ways that upset the status quo, and so he was asked to resign.

3. Finally, we evoke our prophetic imagination through compassion. Brueggemann says that the ultimate criticism that Jesus brought was in his life of compassion and his parables of compassion. Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism for it announces that hurt and exploitation are to be taken seriously – they are not to be accepted as normal and natural parts of life, but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness.<sup>3</sup>

Empires are never built or maintained on the basis of compassion. Thus the compassion of Jesus is to be understood not simply as a personal emotional reaction, but as a public criticism in which he dares to act upon his concern against the numbness of his social context. Those in power have accepted that some will live in pain and poverty to serve those at the top. Empires live by numbness. Jesus penetrates the numbness with compassion and in doing so takes a step in making visible the odd abnormalities that had become business as usual.

When we tell people we went to Northern Iraq, or to the US/Mexico border people always ask, “what did you do?” Assuming we went to build a school or church or do aid work. I always feel a little embarrassed to say, “we went there to listen to people and hear about their lives and what they are experiencing.” But I think it is building of our compassion that is the purpose of such trips, for us to see and hear what has become business as usual in some of the places of the world forgotten by Empire. In N. Iraq, to see how oil companies and governments

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<sup>3</sup> This final section draws heavily on Brueggemann’s *Prophetic Imagination*.

are collaborating to take people's land and livelihood away from them. At the border, to pray at the grave markers of those who died unidentified crossing the desert in hope of a better life – pushed out into the desert by Empire – these should not be acceptable realities for those who follow Jesus Christ. And so we seek to grow in compassion – compassion that insists that these things should not be. And with the prophets, we dare to imagine another way.

In Greek, the language of the New Testament, the metaphor for feeling or reacting with the fullness of emotion is not “heart”, as it is in English, but it is your guts – your innards, in Greek *splagchna*.

And the characteristic Greek word for compassion is *splagchnoisomai*, which means to let one's innards embrace the feeling or situation of another. To let our innards embrace the feeling and situations of another, this is compassion. Replacing numbness with compassion, that is the end of cynical indifference and the beginning of noticed pain. It is also the beginning of a social revolution. It is the beginning of hope.

So perhaps what this means for us is neither turning off the news or listening to so much news that we are overwhelmed and despairing. Perhaps it means listening to one story, or reading one article about one particular situation – to dwell in one situation, to grow in compassion for one situation. Perhaps this might be a way we work to grow in our compassion in the coming weeks.

And so, as we seek to be people who speak what the Lord has given us to speak; to live how God has shown us to live through Jesus Christ, let us attend to these three humble tasks as we seek to continue to build our own prophetic imaginations:

1. To share our grief over what is
2. To believe in the power of our words and speech to help shape and define reality
3. To people a people who grow in our practices of compassion.

May we be such a people. Amen.