

## Modern Day Prophets Call Us To Address Climate Concerns

September 23, 2023

One of the apps I have on my cell phone is that of the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency's Emergency Warning system. The agency has been busy this summer sending out advisories and alerts to my phone notifying me of extreme heat and poor air quality. Even as I sat down to begin this sermon on Tuesday there were three notifications for our province including one for Saskatoon which read, "Smoke from wildfires will push eastward from Alberta ... resulting in poor air quality and reduced visibility. People with lung disease or heart disease, older adults, children, pregnant people, and people who work outdoors are at higher risk of experiencing health effects caused by wildfire smoke."

The forest fires of this summer got me thinking about Biblical prophets and prophecies. You are likely thinking that it is a pretty big leap from forest fires to Biblical prophecy. Let me assure you that I am not in that fringe group of preachers who attempt to link current calamities to the Biblical warnings of 2,000 years ago. Rather, I began thinking about the way human indifference combined with vested interests often thwart the warnings that we receive. In some respects, the ancient Hebrew prophets were the early warning systems for their society.

A significant portion of the Hebrew scriptures is filled with the stories – and warnings – of the prophets. You will likely recognize some their names - major prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah have plentiful chapters devoted to their life and work. Another section, known as the minor prophets include twelve shorter books such as Amos, Hosea and Jonah. Some scholars suggest that prophets are also found in the New Testament. Mary, the mother of Jesus sings a prophetic song when she discovers she is pregnant. Anna, the old woman who welcomed the infant Jesus into the temple, is also described as a prophet. Some scholars argue that Jesus himself functioned as a prophet and it is interesting to note that the followers of Islam revere Jesus as a prophet second only to the prophet Mohamed.

What do Isaiah and Amos, the song of Mary, and the life of Jesus have in common? What makes their lives and message prophetic? 'Navi' is the Hebrew word for prophet and its translation helps us better understand the prophetic life. Navi can be translated as 'prophet' or 'seer' or 'visionary' or 'announcer'. The 'Navim' have often been misunderstood as people who foretell the future; but they are more correctly 'forth-tellers' who are keenly interested in and forcefully vocal about the present. One author writes that a prophet is, "one who addresses and is overwhelmingly addressed by the present, who expands its meaning into the past already present and into a future equally present but relatively imperceptible."

That is a dense definition so let's simplify it. The prophet looks to the past and sees God's hand at work in the liberation of Hebrew slaves from Egypt. That past event defines the present by calling Israelites to be people who free others from the bondage of poverty and oppression. The vocation of being God's people (i.e to enact justice) is

always an unfinished work that is constantly being pursued into the future. Hence the past informs how to live in the present and the present looks to a renewed future.

The prophet's life begins with a profound sense of God's presence. Each prophet has a unique experience of God entering their lives. Isaiah has sensory experience feeling God purify his lips with hot embers; Jeremiah is convinced to buy a plot of land to indicate confidence that God will be in their future; and Hosea's marriage to an unfaithful woman becomes a metaphor for Israel's unfaithfulness to God. Whatever the initial inspiration, the prophet proceeds to assess the relationship between God and the people.

In this morning's scripture Amos names how the privileged people of Israel fail to love their neighbors. He saw them selling off the needy for profit, taking advantage of the helpless, oppressing the poor, and becoming drunk on their own success. The people had lost the concept of caring for one another. Amos holds God's people accountable by repeatedly pointing out their failure to live justly and declaring that the result will be a collapse of their society. Amos is not foretelling the future as much as he is telling forth the condition of the present.

There is often a final stage of prophetic declaration in which the prophet, so convinced of God's persistent love, declares that God will ultimately redeem the people from their troubles and love them back into life. In the book of Amos this assurance comprises only five short verses yet the prophet Isaiah devotes a whole section of his book to this assurance and we remember his familiar words, "Comfort ye, Comfort ye my people."

In the 'dog days' of summer I was perplexed with the question as to why the people did not heed the prophets' warnings. Over and again, we read of an intransigent people who did not change - numbed by their comfortable lifestyles, discouraged from changing by vested political and economic interests, time and again the Israelites risked collapse and turmoil. As fires raged, and smoke obscured the Saskatchewan sun, I realized that people have changed little in two thousand years. From Portugal to Hawaii, from Quebec to California, from British Columbia to Saskatchewan, the world burned as modern-day prophets 'told-forth' the consequences of ignoring climate change.

One such prophet is Greta Thunberg. As a young teen, Thunberg became obsessed with the reality of climate change. So passionate was she, that she persuaded her parents to adopt lifestyle choices that reduced her family's carbon footprint. Her personal passion became prophetic when at the age of 15 she began skipping school with a goal of challenging the Swedish parliament to take action on climate change. Her words and actions reflected what scientists the world over had been 'forth-telling' for decades. We must change how we live or our planet, as we know it, might die. Thunberg became the visible prophet for young people who felt their future threatened. Gradually other young people from around the world joined her prophetic call to action. Between last Sunday and today youth and young climate activists from Sweden to the Philippines, from St. John's Newfoundland to Brandon, Manitoba have

held protests demanding that local governments take real and immediate action to reduce the use of climate altering fossil fuels.

On September 18<sup>th</sup> CBC reported that Greta had experienced the plight of prophets before her, being twice arrested for her prophetic utterances and actions. Being a prophet often means pushing the boundaries and she and other activists blocked the entrance to an oil port in Malmo, Sweden calling for an end to our reliance on fossil fuels. Vested interests do not appreciate the prophetic message. As Christians we know only too well that when Jesus declared that the love of power must be replaced with the power of love, vested interests worked to silence him.

In 2021 the *Harvard Gazette* reported that since the 1970's Exxon and Mobil Oil knew that their products would likely cause global warming yet they consistently underplayed this knowledge calling global warming a 'risk' and not a reality and focused on consumer demand rather than fossil fuel reduction. Closer to home, vested interests have muted prophetic warnings by placing extra taxes on electric vehicles and obfuscating on the price of carbon. To the surprise of some the Government of California earlier this week launched a law suit against the invested interests of oil companies. Speaking for the people of California the Governor stated: "For more than 50 years, Big Oil has been lying to us — covering up the fact that they've long known how dangerous the fossil fuels they produce are for our planet. Wildfires wiping out entire communities, toxic smoke clogging our air, deadly heat waves, record-breaking droughts parching our wells. California taxpayers shouldn't have to foot the bill (alone)."

All this political drama is attention getting, yet what really got me thinking this summer, was how ordinary people like me can become indifferent to prophetic warnings. We learn from our scriptures that ordinary people over and again ignored the prophets' warnings and carried on with the status quo. While I endured oppressive wildfire smoke and watched in horror as forests, homes and even entire towns went up in flames I ignored my own carbon footprint. Why is that? There are some known as 'climate deniers' who don't believe in global warming yet a recent British study revealed that only 4% of the population fit in this category. A much larger category are those now called 'climate dismissives'. I guess I am one of those – feeling that the problem is way beyond my ability to influence and, comfortable in my lifestyle, I dismiss climate concerns from my mind. Amidst the oppressive smoke and community destroying wildfires it was much harder to put this issue out of mind. One article I read suggested that one way to move beyond being a climate dismissive is to simply start talking about climate concerns. Hence, this sermon. One author writes, "By normalizing climate conversations we encourage more healthy emotional responses."

As a result, I mused with Victoria about trying to make do with one vehicle. I remembered my friend Kathy who put on more sweaters rather than turning up her thermostat. I admired my friend Ken who erected solar panels and in the summer is feeding electricity back into the system. I thought about my friend Eric who bought a Tesla and was so impressed that he ordered an electric truck. I know some of you have invested in new windows or doors and increased insulation. As I sample Indigenous

writings, I begin to ponder a new ethic about my relationship to water and to trees. Suddenly what seemed overwhelming morphed into constructive conversations. Suddenly indifference turned to curiosity and hopefully, action.

Although the Biblical prophets were persistent and courageous forth-tellers about the problems they saw, they never relinquished a belief that God was at work in the world constantly calling the people to new life. God is still at work in our world, inspiring modern-day prophets to call us to a new way of living. May we heed their call and let love for our planet-home shape our future. Amen.

Rev. Brian Walton