



Marvin A. McMickle is the Senior Minister at Antioch Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio and Professor of Homiletics at Ashland Theological Seminary in Ashland, Ohio.

This essay is from his entry entitled “Prophetic Message” in the *New Interpreters Handbook of Preaching* (Abingdon Press, 2008) In it he discusses what he believes is the current state of prophetic preaching.

Prophetic Message

One of the essential needs in every congregation of believers is an occasional sermon rooted in the words and witness of the Old Testament prophets. Preachers need to play a role within the life of their congregation and their community similar to the role that such people as Amos, Jeremiah, and Micah played within the life of the nations of Israel and Judah. James Ward and Christine Ward begin their important book on this subject of prophetic preaching by writing:

The natural inclination of the Christian community, like all religious communities, is to adapt its witness of faith to its most immediate human needs. In doing this the community always runs the risk of obscuring the wider dimensions of the gospel, particularly the wider implications of God’s demand for righteousness and justice. What is needed, therefore, is preaching that recovers these wider dimensions and illuminates the ways in which the community obscures them. (1995, 11)

What is prophetic preaching?

Prophetic preaching shifts the focus of a congregation from what is happening to them as a local church to what is happening to us as a society. Prophetic preaching then asks the question, “What is the role or the appropriate response of our congregation, our association and our denomination to the events that are occurring within our society and throughout the world?” Prophetic preaching points out those false gods of comfort and of a lack of concern and acquiescence in the face of evil that can so easily replace the true God of scripture who calls true believers to the active pursuit of justice and righteousness for every member of the society.

The prophets preached truth to power, attacking the monarchs and the ruling elite for putting more confidence in armies and alliances than they did in the God who had brought them into that land. The prophets challenged the people of Israel who believed that God would never abandon them no matter how far the nation strayed from the covenant it had established with God back at Sinai. With an urgency that could not be contained and a fervor that could not be controlled, the prophets declared their “Thus says the Lord” despite the ridicule, rebuke and outright rejection that most of them

experienced throughout their lives. It is impossible to imagine the biblical narrative being told without the pronouncements of the prophets.

Why is prophetic preaching important today?

It is easy to see the need for prophetic preaching in our churches and throughout our society. Many Christians worship inside of immaculately maintained churches that are situated in neighborhoods that look like bombed out war zones. Many Christians drive to church from the suburbs to churches located within a community that has been ravaged by poverty, drug trafficking, the loss of industry through outsourcing and factory closings and under funded and overwhelmed public school systems. Of course, many Christians never have to see these sights or confront the people and problems in these inner city communities, because they have moved out of the city to pristine outer ring suburbs and have brought their churches out to those upscale areas with them.

For those who continue to travel into the crumbling and decaying cities of our nation it is crucial that they hear a prophetic word about the problems that surround their church, the social policies that are the root cause of those problems and what they can do as an expression of their biblical faith to bring about change. For those who live and worship in exurbia and who never get close enough to the grimy side of America for anything to rub off on them, prophetic preaching becomes even more urgent. It is crucial that people with wealth, power and influence be challenged by a prophetic word that calls upon them to direct their resources not simply for tax advantages for themselves, but for a fairer and more just society for their fellow citizens.

What are the issues and themes of prophetic preaching?

The prophets remind Israel, just as we need to be reminded through regular doses of prophetic preaching, that God is the sovereign creator and sustainer of the whole creation. The God who sent Jonah to preach salvation in Nineveh is the same God who used Babylon and Persia as the instruments of God's will. The God who formed Israel into a great nation when they were delivered from bondage in Egypt is the same God who can send Israel back into captivity and cause them to hang their harps upon the willows and weep as they sit along the banks of the River Chebar and remember the life they once lived back in Zion. God's concern is for the whole of creation and for all the people that dwell therein. When the people of God lose sight of the fact and begin acting as if only they and their nation really matter, it is time for a prophet to declare, "Thus says the Lord!" In other words, God does not sing, "God Bless America!"

Prophetic preaching focused the people's attention on the issues that were broader than how to worship or where to pray or what it is lawful to eat. The Mosaic covenant included a series of clear commandments to care for the widows, the orphans and the stranger who was among them. When the people of Israel lost sight of that commandment the prophets were there to remind them. When contemporary churches become more interested in praise and worship than in justice and righteousness, it is time for prophetic preaching.

Now as then, there is a need to lift up the conditions of widows, orphans and strangers. Today they take the form of single women, many of them living in great poverty, who have been abandoned by husbands and boyfriends and are raising children by themselves. The world is literally awash with children who have been left orphaned by the unrelenting ravages of HIV/AIDS, as well as by tribal warfare in Africa, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that use the methods of terror (shock and awe) to combat acts of terrorism around the world.

The stranger is also among us today, though here too the forms have shifted. Now they are the migrant workers who pick our food, the illegal immigrants who clean our homes and hotels, and the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and inside of Abu Ghraib prison who are under U.S. control but not afforded the protections of the U.S. Constitution, the Geneva Convention or the common decency that any U.S. citizen would expect and/or demand for themselves. The stranger is also that person with an “Arab sounding name” or that Sikh from India who, because his religion requires him to wear a turban or some other kind of head wrap, they are being caught up in the post-9/11 frenzy created and sustained by a government that is always on the lookout for a “person of interest.”

How is the Bible used in prophetic preaching?

Prophetic preaching does not demand or even require the use of a text taken from one of the prophetic books of the OT. Nor does it require any reference to one of the prophets of the classical period that stretched from the 8th to the 5th cent. BCE. Many sermons based upon a passage from a prophetic book have been far more “pathetic” than “prophetic.” That is usually the result of a preacher who did not have his/her focus on that which constantly occupied the biblical prophets, namely the fact that God’s people were living in disobedience to the covenant that had been established between God and the people.

Prophetic preaching occurs when the preacher seeks to bring the will of God to the attention of the people of God, and then, as Elizabeth Achtemeier observes, challenge them “to trust their Lord in all circumstances and to obey him with willing and grateful hearts.” (1998, 118–19) Prophetic preaching happens when the preacher has the courage to speak truth to power not only inside of the church building but also in the streets and board rooms and jail cells of the secular order. We must be willing to do this if we are to be faithful to and worthy of following in the footsteps of Samuel who confronted Saul, Nathan who confronted David, Amos who condemned Jeroboam, Jeremiah who challenged both Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, and John the Baptist who did not grow mute or meek in the presence of Herod Antipas. In a time of “patriot pastors” and the belief that critiquing the leaders of the nation is both ungodly and unpatriotic, it is time for prophetic preaching. It is time to hear the words, “This is what the Lord says.”

The challenge of prophetic preaching is as old as the Christian community itself. No less a preacher than John Chrysostom, 337-407 (patriarch of Constantinople) offers a key insight into preaching prophetically when he observes: “Preachers must tame the multitudes’ undisciplined and dangerous desire for pleasure and make them listen with greater benefit, so that they allow themselves to listen and be led by him, and he is not led by their lusts.”¹ This is not far removed from the challenge given by Paul to Timothy in II Timothy 4: 1-6 in which Paul challenges his young friend to “correct, rebuke, and

encourage”... during a time when people have itching ears that may cause them to turn aside from the truth,... and may result in the preacher having to endure hardship.”

There is nothing easy about prophetic preaching, especially within a black church that is fixated on the false gods of Prosperity Theology and on an approach to praise and worship that requires no service or sacrifice. It was that empty religion that was so roundly condemned in Amos 5, and we, too, must cry aloud and spare not.

No pastor can or should engage in prophetic preaching every Sunday, because there are many other themes that must also be addressed over the course of a year. Cleophus LaRue makes this point with his five domains of experience in his book *The Heart of Black Preaching*. He talks about “personal piety, care of the soul, social justice, community concerns, and maintaining the institutional church.”² But as was said at the outset, every congregation can benefit from an occasional sermon rooted in the power and passion of prophetic preaching!

Bibliography:

- Elizabeth Achtemeier. *Preaching From the Minor Prophets* (1998)
Yngve Brilioth, *A Brief History of Preaching* (1965)
Walter Brueggemann. *Prophetic Imagination* (2001)
Cleophus LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (2001)
Marvin McMickle. *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?* (2006)
Mark Taylor. *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right* (2005)
James Ward and Christine Ward, *Preaching From the Prophets* (1995)
Beverly Zink-Sawyer. *From Preachers to Suffragists* (2003).

Notes

1. Yngve Brilioth, *A Brief History of Preaching*, Fortress Press: Philadelphia, PA, 1965, pp. 38-39.
2. Cleophus LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching*, Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2000, pp. 21-25.