

Sermon for Advent 2, Year B, December 4, 2011
Mark 1:1-8

Good Morning!

A couple of months ago in September, Margaret and I were in New York with two of our kids, and some of Margaret's family. It was a family vacation, a chance to "do" New York, and generally to enjoy the city with family. On one of our outings, we were in lower Manhattan and came upon a park filled with people. There was a bullhorn being passed around among several people who took turns speaking to the crowd. I strained to hear what they were saying but it was difficult. We walked around the crowd and made our way up towards Ground Zero and Wall Street. When we arrived at Wall Street opposite Trinity Parish, we encountered a large police presence blocking off the street that leads down to the Stock Exchange. One of our party finally asked one of the officers what was going on, and was told that they were there to keep the protesters away from the Stock Exchange.

We didn't realize it until later that we were witnessing the birth of a protest movement that day in September. The park we passed by was Zuccotti Park and I believe the day we were there was September 17 - the birthday of the Occupy Wall Street movement that has since expanded throughout this country and beyond. A clergy colleague of Mary's and mine in this neighborhood has already become involved with the Occupy Seattle movement. He sent an email to the clergy in this neighborhood describing his experience with a recent demonstration here in the U.District, and declared that this is a prophetic movement. It is time, he believes, for the church to become involved with the movement that is decrying corporate corruption. It is best he feels to be on the side of prophecy.

And this raises the question, is this, in fact, a prophetic movement? What does it mean to be prophetic, especially from a religious point of view? Who are the prophets of our day and time? There are plenty of criticisms of the Occupy Wall Street movement, but prophets have a history of being criticized and challenged and condemned. Who are the people and the movements that disturb us in 2011?

Our gospel lesson from Mark this morning speaks of another prophet from the first century. John the Baptist (One translator refers to him as John the

‘Dipper’) is considered to be the forerunner of Jesus, the ‘voice crying out in the wilderness,’ proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. The wilderness that John conducted his ministry of baptizing for the forgiveness of sins was east of Jerusalem, approximately 18 miles from the city, at the point where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea. It is a desolate area that, according to our gospel lesson, drew people from all over the Judean region and the city of Jerusalem. And it is here that John baptizes Jesus and, according to the other gospels, the heavens opened and a dove descended upon Jesus with a voice from heaven declaring, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, listen to him.’

In Jewish tradition, it is believed that the prophet Elijah will precede the Messiah. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus tells his followers that Elijah has in fact returned, and the disciples realize Jesus to be saying that John is Elijah returned. It is Elijah who appears with Moses in the presence of Jesus at the Transfiguration. If Moses symbolizes the tradition of the Law, Elijah represents the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel. And in the gospels, John is identified with Elijah. He is the one who heralds the coming of the Messiah. John is a prophet in the tradition of Elijah.

We know from Scripture there were a number of prophets in ancient Israel. They were chosen by God to deliver a message of either judgment or hope to the people of Israel. In most cases, the people chosen didn’t want the job. In Jonah’s case, he ran the other way. Prophets were frequently criticized, condemned and persecuted. The prophets of the Old Testament did not predict the future. Rather, by divine inspiration, they spoke for God, interpreting the signs of the times, and calling the people to be faithful by recommitting themselves to the covenant. The prophets in scripture were all about faith and obedience to God, and concerned for the welfare of the marginalized. If this is criteria for being a prophet, then we might well ask, who are the prophets of our time?

One person that I consider to have been a prophet in the last century was Thomas Merton. Merton was a Trappist monk, prolific author, and social critic. Born in France, orphaned at a young age, he came to this country to finish his education at Columbia. While in New York, he had a conversion to the Catholic Church and early on began to consider the monastic life as a vocation. He tried to enter the Franciscan Order, and after being turned down by them, he resolved to live a monastic life in the world. But he was given a second chance when he visited a Trappist monastery in Kentucky. Merton was bowled over by his visit and began the process to become a

member of that religious order. Due to his skills as a writer, he was given permission to write a book about his experience of conversion and joining a contemplative order. His book was entitled, "The Seven Story Mountain," and became an instant success in the early 1950's. The public gobbled up his books that described the contemplative life of a monastery.

But Merton did not stick to writing about the life of prayer. His prayer life was inspiring a social witness and protest within him towards the injustices that he was observing and hearing about in the world. Merton began writing about the 'Ban the Bomb' movement in the late 1950's. He became an early critic of the Vietnam War, and an early advocate for the Civil Rights movement, long before it became chic or fashionable to do so. Many people who had formerly embraced his writings on prayer, turned against him. Merton was an active correspondent with social activists such as Joan Baez, and Dorothy Day, writers, and religious figures from Catholicism and other religious traditions. I remember coming across Merton's description of Harlem in Eldridge Cleaver's book, 'Soul on Ice.' Cleaver was in prison at that time and declared in his book that Merton was the first White person to truly understand what it was like to be African American in this society. Cleaver felt a real kinship with Merton and he was perplexed that Merton was at home, truly at home, in a monastic cell, while he, Cleaver, languished against his will in a prison cell.

In 1968, Merton went to Thailand to participate in an interfaith dialogue between Christian and Buddhist monks. He delivered a controversial paper entitled 'Marxism and Monasticism' where he stated that modern man and woman would need to learn to live among institutions that were failing or passing away. I have read that his presentation was uncomfortably received by those in attendance. When he finished, he said, eerily prophetically, 'I must now disappear.' He intended to go back to his room, take a bath, and have a nap before rejoining the conference. It was in his room while he was in the bath that an electric fan fell into the bath water electrocuting him to death. The final irony of his life was that his body was flown back to the U.S. on a U.S. military transport bearing the remains of American soldiers killed in Vietnam. As I said earlier, he was an early critic of the Vietnam War.

Merton's protest came from a disciplined life of prayer – deep prayer – that nurtured him in the silent presence of God. For him, the life of prayer and the life of protest were two sides of the same coin. I consider him to be a

prophet who embraced God's quarrel with racism, war, and poverty. Through biting commentary, Merton challenged the injustices of his time from a religious perspective.

And that prompts the question, who are the prophets of our time? I consider Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian President who went and spoke at the Israeli Knesset in the 1970's to be a prophet. He reached across boundaries with the Israeli Prime Minister to establish a peace agreement between the two countries. And he eventually paid the price for his efforts when he was assassinated by a group in his country who opposed his efforts. I consider Gandhi to have been a prophet with his nonviolent means of protest. He, too, was assassinated. I consider Martin Luther King, Jr. to have been a prophet in his struggle against racism. He, too, like Sadat and Gandhi, paid the ultimate price.

Who are the prophets of today? Who calls for us to make sacrifices, to reach across partisan or ideological barriers, to take risks, to seek the welfare of those who are marginalized or oppressed, who organizes for peace and justice, who sees in the oppressor the humanity that we all share?

Who are the prophets of our day? As Frederick Buechner reminds us, the prophet's quarrel is a lover's quarrel. If the prophet didn't ultimately love the world, he or she would simply turn his or her back upon the world and go their own way. Their quarrel, according to Buechner, is God's quarrel.