

## "Being a Prophetic Voice"

1 Samuel 3:1-18 and Isaiah 43:19

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**"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"**

Isaiah 43:19 NRSV

It's a warm spring Sunday at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia. As the minister is about to present Holy Communion, a tall, well dressed black man sitting in the section reserved for African Americans only unexpectedly advances to the communion rail; unexpectedly because it has never happened before. Not ever.

The congregation freezes. Those that had been ready to go forward and kneel at the communion rail remain fixed in their pews. The minister stands in his place stunned and motionless as the black man slowly lowers his body, kneeling at the communion rail. The silence is so charged with emotion that it makes the ears of all who hear it tingle.

After what seems like eternity, an older white man rises. His hair snowy white, head up, and eyes focused, he walks proudly up the aisle and quietly kneels beside the black man. The two receive communion together. Shoulder to shoulder. That white man was General Robert E. Lee. The date was April, 1865, the very spring the smoke began to settle from our nation's civil war.<sup>1</sup>

In that moment, General Robert E. Lee embodied God's resolve to do a new thing. 103 years later, God brought forth another prophetic moment in history. It belonged to a man named Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Hear now his prophetic voice as he delivers his final speech just 24 hours before his assassination.

*[Video clip.]*

**"All we say to America is, be true to what you said on paper. If I lived in China or even Russia, or any totalitarian country, maybe I could understand some of these illegal injunctions. Maybe I could understand the denial of certain basic First Amendment privileges, because they hadn't committed themselves to that over there. But somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for right. And so just as I say we aren't going to let dogs or water hoses turn us around, we aren't going to let any injunction turn us around. We are going on.**

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from General Lee's Greatest Victory, Donald R. McClarey, Nov. 12, 2008, American Catholic

**Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”<sup>2</sup>**

Dr. Martin Luther King embodied God's resolve to do a new thing. He embodied the truth that our God will not acquiesce to evil, that corrupt institutions and oppressive practices need not, will not, endure forever.

On June 7, 2003, Gene Robinson was the first openly gay man to be elected Bishop in the historic Episcopal Church in the Dioceses of New Hampshire. On the day of his consecration as bishop, Robinson wore a bullet-proof vest under his vestments in response to countless death threats. On that same day, journalists in attendance reported catching sight of Robinson showing his vest to colleague Barbara Harris, who 14 years earlier was also advised to wear a bullet-proof vest at her consecration as the first woman bishop in the Episcopal Church in 1989. Both Barbara Harris and Gene Robinson embodied God's resolve to do a new thing.

This is what it means to be prophetic—to have a prophetic voice. It means to embody God's resolve to do a new thing. To embody both judgment and hope at the very same time. On the one hand, to deliver a message filled with harsh and necessary endings—a message so charged with intense emotion that it will make the ears of everyone who hears it tingle. And on the other hand, to be a living testament of hope, God's living, breathing, initiative in raising up new prophetic leaders that will enable God's new beginning.

It is the story of Dr. Martin Luther King. It is the story of Barbara Harris and Gene Robinson. It is the story of our boy Samuel in this morning's scripture. It is the story of every person in this room who has come of age in a time of social upheaval and institutional corruption and dared to be a mouthpiece for all that is good and right and just.

Prophets signal with their lives and their leadership a turning point. For King it was the turning point of a nation so what we said on paper about our founding principles might

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<sup>2</sup> YouTube link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YB4bV34G17g&feature=related>

actually be true. For Samuel it was the turning point of God's relationship with the holy people of Israel. It was a time, the scriptures say, where the lamp had almost gone out in the temple. A time when the word of God was rare and visions were not widespread. And in the midst of this impending darkness, God calls forth the boy Samuel who is sleeping in the temple next to the Ark of the Covenant because it is his job to make sure that the light does not go out in the house of God. The light which is the symbol of God's presence among us.

Do you hear an invitation? I do.

God uses anybody to bring about change, regardless of status, regardless of how young or inexperienced or insignificant you may think you are. Young Samuel is given by God a message of reform that will make the ears of all who hear it tingle. And in that moment he becomes the embodiment of God's resolve to do a new thing—a new thing in the house of worship.

Most know that Genesis is an open and affirming congregation. And for those of you who have not been present during one of our new member retreats, I want to describe to you a conversation that inevitably comes up in every retreat. How do we hold together this reality of being an open and affirming congregation with the larger denomination we call the United Methodist Church? How do these things go together? And I pause, and I take a deep breath, and I begin what is, for me, a very difficult and awkward conversation.

I say to my brothers and sisters that in this moment in the history of the United Methodist Church I cannot perform same sex marriages or I will lose my job. Nor can Genesis host same sex weddings on our property. And should your faith be nurtured by God and by this community in such a way that you receive a call to ministry and you happen to be openly gay, we cannot ordain you.

And then I turn to them; I turn to my lesbian and gay sisters and brothers and I say to them, "Would you like to join this beautiful and flawed institution? Would you like to pledge your loyalty to this beautiful and flawed institution?" And here is where the miracle happens . . .

Because our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters actually say, "Yes. Yes. Yes, I will join you in being a prophetic voice and a prophetic presence for this denomination. Yes, I will join you in embodying God's resolve to do a new thing. Yes, I will do it."

And when I ask them why, here is what they say . . .

"Because, if there is any institution worth redeeming, it's the church."

And they say to me, "You know what? My daughter has two moms, and I don't ever want her to grow up feeling like a second class citizen."

They say to me, "My faith is so important to me, and I would give anything for a community to share it with."

We come here on a Sunday morning and see glimpses of the Promised Land. And it fans a prophetic fire in our bones to be part of God's resolve to do a new thing. And so we say "Yes!

I want to broaden this conversation.

Peter goes to our church. Peter is a cognitively and emotionally impaired young adult, and he comes to worship with his parents. He came once on the fourth Sunday, communion Sunday. And he heard me say that little blurb I say every time we celebrate the sacrament here at Genesis . . . "In the United Methodist Church we celebrate an open communion, which means all are welcome to God's table." After hearing these words, Peter leans over to his mom and says, "Even me?" And his mom smiles and she says, "Yes, Peter, even you."

Maria worships with us each Sunday. She is an Iranian refugee who doesn't speak English. She hasn't a clue what we're saying, but she can feel the Spirit of God moving in and through this place. She can feel it. And I think to myself "Yes! The Spirit of God moving in and through this place. Yes, that's right."

You know what? We are black and white and biracial. We are gay and straight, married and divorced, special needs, angry, joyful, wealthy, barely scraping by financially, young, old, folks with issues, folks with no issues. This, my friends, is what the kingdom of God looks like. Look around you. TOGETHER, we embody God's resolve to do a new thing.

In our best moments of worshipping, in the best moments of being the body of Christ, you can look around this place and see the coming of the glory of the Lord.

Praise be to God!