



“Standing Up for Truth”
Scripture – 1 Kings 22:1-28
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, August 28, 2016

As this long, long story unfolds, the northern kingdom of ancient Israel and the neighboring nation, Aram (today, Syria), have been living in peace for three years. But when King Jehoshaphat of the southern kingdom comes to visit King Ahab in the north, King Ahab feels compelled to strut his manliness. He talks of picking a war with Aram over a disputed territory called Ramoth-gilead.

Ahab says to his servants, “You know this area belongs to us, but we are doing nothing to take it back.” He turns to King Jehoshaphat to see if he will be a willing ally. “Will you go with me to battle at Ramoth-gilead?”

Well, you know what happens when one man starts talking tough. It boosts the testosterone level of all the men in the room. So, Jehoshaphat throws out his chest, “Yeah, let’s go to war!” But before he gets too carried away with the glory of conquest, he says to Ahab, “But first, we should find out what God thinks about this idea.”

So Ahab gathers all of his prophets together – 400 of them – and puts the question: “Should I go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or should I leave it alone?”

All 400 cry out in unison, “Go for it! The Lord will give you the victory!”

This is a section of the Bible we usually avoid because, frankly, a lot of it is focused on bloodshed and glorifying war and making the claim that God is on the side of the Hebrews and an enemy of other nations. It’s a far cry from later prophets that call for the people “to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God.” It’s at odds with Isaiah’s declaration that God wants the people of the world to “beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” And it’s diametrically opposed to the teachings of Jesus to love not only our neighbor, but our enemy, and to become peacemakers.

Yet today’s story is worthy of our attention, because it’s not really about the glory of war. Jehoshaphat is impressed with Ahab’s prophets and their unified voice to attack Aram. However, he may have second thoughts about rushing into battle, because he says to Ahab, “Is this really all of your prophets? Are you sure there are no more?”

Ahab replies, “Well, there is one more – Micaiah – but I hate him. He never prophesies anything favorable about me; he only predicts disaster.”

Jehoshaphat would like to hear from this cantankerous prophet and Ahab drops his resistance. Why? Maybe it is because he is not a moron. He is wise enough to realize that all of these other prophets are simply “Yes men.”

Their driving ambition is to stay out of trouble and in the good graces of the king by telling him what he wants to hear. Ahab knows that Micaiah is the only one who will not tell him what he *wants* to hear, but only what the prophet believes to be the truth. So, Ahab summons an officer and says, “Bring Micaiah.”

While the officer is off searching for Micaiah, Ahab and Jehoshaphat sit on thrones before the prophets looking very kingly in their elaborate purple robes.

The prophets put on a show for them and one of the prophets, Zedekiah, makes horns of iron and says, “Thus says the Lord: With these you shall gore the Arameans until they are destroyed!” All of the other prophets begin to chant, “We will, we will rock you!”

All right, not exactly; but what they say is in a similar vein. They say, “Go up to Ramoth-gilead and triumph; the Lord will give it into the hand of the king!”

While the 400 prophets are juicing up the kings for an attack, the officer finds Micaiah and says to him, “Look, all the other prophets told the king to attack and retake control of Ramoth-gilead. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll do the same.”

The officer takes Micaiah back to where the kings are enthroned and Ahab says, “Micaiah, should we go to war over Ramoth-gilead, or should we not?”

With sarcasm dripping from his lips, Micaiah says, “Sure. Go out and triumph. The Lord will see that you win.”

Ahab jumps to his feet and his nostrils flare. “Don’t play games with me, Micaiah. Tell me the truth!”

“You want the truth?” Micaiah says, “No you don’t; but I’ll tell you the truth anyway. I see all of your warriors scattered on the mountains, like sheep without a shepherd.”

Ahab turns to Jehoshaphat and says, “What did I tell you? This malcontent only predicts doom!”

But, Micaiah isn’t finished. He tells a story. Is it a dream? Has he had a vision? Is he expressing his intuitions poetically?

He says that God has assembled the heavenly court and called for one of the spirits to entice Ahab into battle where he will be defeated. One of the heavenly beings says, “I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all of Ahab’s prophets.” And God sanctions it.

Doesn’t that sounds a bit troubling? Is the author of this passage wanting to assert God’s control over all that happens or is he trying to explain why all 400 prophets were wrong? Or, is he declaring that Ahab was a terrible King who was always out of step with God, because he allowed his wife, Jezebel to spread the worship of a foreign god? Or, could it possibly be that God enticed Ahab into war so that he would be defeated; demonstrating the folly of war and serving as a warning to any king eager to do battle rather than tackling the more difficult business of learning to live in peace with other nations?

Upon hearing Micaiah’s prediction of defeat, Zedekiah, a leader of the false prophets, storms forward and slaps him for prophesying disaster. King Ahab orders Micaiah to be thrown in prison and fed only bread and water.

If we had read the remainder of 1 Kings, we would discover that Micaiah was right. Ahab led his troops into battle at Ramoth-gilead where he was mortally wounded and his troops defeated.

In the ancient world, there were hundreds who claimed to be prophets. As today's text notes, there were 400 in the northern kingdom of ancient Israel when Ahab was king. Many were exposed to be false prophets because their oracles turned out to be wrong. The ones whose prophecies proved true are the ones we know by name: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos and so on. They were the ones whose words were on target. They were the ones who were God's authentic mouthpieces.

Some imagine that these prophets heard the clearly audible voice of God, similar to the way you are hearing my voice. That's possible, but if so, why did God stop talking to people? Except, of course, for the slick TV preachers who declared God caused 9/11 because of the feminist movement or killed people in a hurricane because they were advocates of equal protection under the law regardless of sexual orientation.

I have difficulty believing that the ancient prophets whose revelations turned out to be correct had a hotline to God that is no longer operative today. Rather, I think the well-known prophets were particularly astute at reading the signs of their times – the political, economic, religious and social indicators – while *at the same time*, they were more tuned in than the average person to the whispers of God.

A number of times the Scriptures indicate that someone gleaned a message from God in a dream or ecstatic spiritual vision, something rare, but not unheard of today. Our dreams are influenced by what is going on in our lives and in the world. Discerning the meaning of our dreams can reveal great insights.

As I see it, genuine prophets had to be keenly aware of their current context, had to suppress their personal egos, and had to firmly believe that God wants justice, mercy and peace. They also needed a particular personal attribute – courage. True prophets always face stiff opposition. Many are threatened and some are murdered for their message. Jesus was executed for advocating God's kingdom as opposed to the Roman Empire. In the 20th Century, the world witnessed the assassinations of Mahatma Gandhi, Oscar Romero, and Martin Luther King, Jr. because they took bold stands for justice and peace.

Gandhi said something that ought to ring in the ears of all people of faith. He said, "Fearlessness is the first requisite of spirituality." The most critical attribute of people of faith is the courage to live our faith.

Leading up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, our government told us we must invade Iraq because there were weapons of mass destruction. The media went along for the ride. Most progressives and conservatives agreed that war was the only answer. Our soldiers would be welcomed as liberators and Iraq would become a democracy. There were few voices of opposition.

Living in Virginia at the time, I remember the witness of a group of women who were opposed to the war. Every Friday afternoon, they dressed in black and marched in silence along a busy thoroughfare in Richmond. Most passersby shouted vulgarities at them; many accused them of being unpatriotic and told them exactly where they could go. They withstood a great deal of verbal abuse, but week after week they marched in silent protest.

Obviously, they and other groups like them were unsuccessful in dissuading our government from invading and unleashing untold suffering that continues to this day. But they remain a lasting symbol for many who saw them as people who refused to support what was easy and popular, but remained true to their principles despite overwhelming opposition.

That is the model the prophet Micaiah has bequeathed to us. Have the courage to speak the truth, regardless of consequences.

Heidi Neumark is a Lutheran pastor in New York. Her grandfather, who was Jewish, built and directed a steel works plant in Germany. In 1933 when the Nazis began to take over German-owned businesses a group of her

grandfather's former friends told him he needed to retire quietly and hand over his business. Instead of going along with this retirement lie, he wrote a letter which reads in part:

“Dear Mr. Faubry, my thanks for your advice. You know my background and my German convictions. I will never leave my post as a coward. I was a soldier and I defended my conception of life with tenacity all my life long. If hard work and self-sacrificing devotion do not work in the new Germany, we should not disguise that any more. I will not leave voluntarily, but only give way to force. How far my old friends will follow me must be left to them individually. I will be back on Tuesday. Kindly let the office know about my return.”

In a short time, “he was removed by force, and eventually taken to a camp and murdered. It must have seemed to him that his words were powerless; that his stand for truth in the midst of deceit meant nothing. But 80 years later, thanks to an archivist, who spent hours going through hundreds of papers, his letter came into his granddaughter's hands – the granddaughter he never knew. Now, his words inspire her daily to keep faith when critical efforts appear to be futile, because you never know when your witness will break through.”¹

We may never know all the repercussions of telling the truth. You may never know how **your** words and actions inspire someone else to find the courage to do what is right. Do you think God wants you to be popular or to stand up for justice?

NOTES

1. Heidi Neumark, “Mark My Words,” Festival of Homiletics, May 2016.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God – who was and is and is to come – With your creative breath you animated creation, stirred dry bones to life, and energized your church; you empowered prophets of old, and commissioned disciples to proclaim the good news; you dwelled among us as the Word made flesh and taught us the way of love. In every age, you have sent your Spirit to create and re-create, to renew and reform, to help and to heal. Send your Spirit upon us now, and draw us into your creative work.

We pray for this world, groaning for redemption, and join our voices with those in every land who cry out for justice and peace. Long ago you swept over the waters of chaos and called forth order and life. Yet chaotic forces still threaten the well-being of creation. Violence and terror seem to reign supreme, and natural disasters – at once far away and shockingly close – remind us of the uncertainty of life. We pray for those around the world who are grieving unimaginable loss – the loss of loved ones, of homes, of community, of security. In these last weeks, so many have had their lives and livelihoods torn apart. Sweep over the rubble in Italy, and Turkey, and California, and Myanmar, and Baton Rouge; sweep over this chaos, O God, and – again – call forth order and life.

God of creation, who sees possibility in all things, send your Spirit upon us and energize us again for your work. In every age, you have called upon ordinary people to do extraordinary things; you have raised up prophets to point us back to you, and apostles to proclaim your good news. Even now, you empower your church to build your kingdom on earth. By your grace, sustain us for your mission. Give us courage to proclaim the truth of your Gospel: that, in Christ, you have come that *all* might have life, and have it abundantly. When others would deny this truth, help us stand for justice, offer compassion, and practice reconciliation ... until all creation experiences your wholeness.

We pray this and all things in the name of your Son, who gave us words to pray: **Our Father ...**