



**“Prophetic Spirituality”**  
**Scripture – Luke 4:16-21**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, September 8, 2019**

Much has been said about the fact that we live in turbulent times. A significant portion of the public is frustrated and fearful. Frustrated by the income inequality gap, fearful of people unlike themselves. Frustrated by political gridlock, fearful of losing basic rights. Frustrated by the rising costs of health care and college, fearful of never being able to retire. Frustrated by the rapid pace of change, fearful of becoming a dinosaur.

The internet has thrown open the flood gates and we are drowning in data. We have access to more information than ever before, and we are more susceptible to fabricated stories than ever before. Some dismiss verifiable facts with a cavalier shrug if those facts contradict their personal point of view. Forging our best path forward can feel like negotiating our way through a minefield of uncompromising positions. Danger abounds and any misstep could trigger catastrophe.

As people of faith, we are compelled to ask: Do the Scriptures reveal wisdom for not merely *surviving* life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but for sculpting a better world?

As I see it, we have three choices. First, we can surrender to the forces at play and go along for the ride like being in a canoe without a paddle swept along by the current. Second, we can withdraw from the broader world into a small, private existence. Third, we can resist the moral deterioration of today and throw ourselves into nudging the world toward God’s vision.<sup>1</sup> This third choice is to commit ourselves to following the path of Jesus and the prophets.

If we make a conscious decision to commit ourselves to this option, we are signing on to partner with God and other people of goodwill to expand God’s kingdom on earth. It requires us to speak and to act boldly by saying NO to hateful rhetoric, greed, discrimination, violence, inequality, and the destruction of the environment. And it compels us to say YES to human dignity; YES to freedom and equality; YES to compassion; YES to affirming the image of God in each person; and YES to caring for God’s creation. In short, it is a commitment to live a life driven by love, devoted to truth, obsessed with justice, and fixated on peace.

Many people compartmentalize their religious life. In their minds, their spiritual lives are limited to those moments they withdraw from daily living to worship, to pray, and to read Scripture or a book on spirituality. Further, they believe that the central purpose of a religious life is to help you become a nice person and to possess the right beliefs to get your ticket stamped so you can go to heaven when you die.

It is essential for people of faith to spend time alone with God in prayer, to reflect on Scripture, and to attempt to discern the whispers of God deep in our soul. However, when the bulk of one's faith becomes private, it can no longer claim to be authentic faith.

A bridge club meets once a month at the home of one of its members. They have been playing bridge together for several years and no one becomes fussy when the group does more chatting and eating than playing cards.

One evening, the discussion at one table centered on religion. Yes, a very dangerous subject to approach in a social gathering!

One woman was complaining that her church did not help members deepen their personal faith. Another woman said the main focus of the church should be serving the needs of people who are hurting. She pointed to the passage where Jesus called on his followers to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and care for the ill. The first woman countered with the story of Mary and Martha in which Mary, the one who sat at the feet of Jesus and soaked in his teachings, was held up as the example to follow, not Martha who was serving.

These bridge partners represent many. Some believe the emphasis should be on worship, prayer, and study; while others believe the priority must be mission and service.

But an active spiritual life includes both interior work AND outward action. The interior work is wrestling with the big questions – Who am I? What is the purpose of my life? How should I live? These are the questions we grapple with in worship, in personal prayer, and in reading and reflecting on Scripture.

However, our interior life is immature if it does not propel us to act. When we finally grasp the truth that each person is created in the image of God and we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves, we are inspired to feed people who are hungry, comfort people who suffer, stand up for people who are oppressed, and use our gifts to work for the common good.

What sort of interior work do you practice in addition to worship? Do you pray? Meditate? Reflect on scripture or other spiritual writings? Is your prayer life centered on your family's health, happiness, and security, or does it also reflect on ways you can extend yourself to the lost, the lonely, and the least?

Jesus and the prophets would retreat from the world to spend time alone with God, but it was never an end in itself. Time alone with God is time to recalibrate our soul, to discover wisdom and guidance, and to revitalize our hope. Such time is essential because God always sends us back into the world to engage the issues and problems of our day and to touch the lives of others.

How are we to relate to others and what determines our approach to the controversies and concerns we encounter? For people of faith, the scriptures are indispensable. While some passages are bound to a pre-scientific worldview and an ancient patriarchal culture, much of the Bible contains wisdom that resonates in all historical eras and reveals the kind of person God wants us to become.

The overall message of the Bible is that God loves all that God has created – the earth and all its creatures, from single-cell organisms to complex human beings. The Bible is the story of human frailties and misadventures – how people stray from God's path and the consequences that result. And it is the story of how God keeps trying to woo us back when we veer off track.

As followers of Jesus, we focus the bulk of our attention on him – especially the gospels which tell the story of his life and provide us with his teachings and ministry. However, we stunt our faith if we have scant knowledge of the prophets who came before him, because Jesus does not stand alone; he stands on the shoulders of the Jewish prophets.

Further, our lack of knowledge about the prophets skews our understanding of Jesus and his message. We are quick to point out that Jesus focused on love. God loves us and in order to be faithful, we are to love others. However, our ignorance of the prophets dilutes our understanding of all that love entails. We know that love often emerges from feelings of compassion. However, the prophets remind us that true compassion for others will also ignite anger at injustice.

Jesus was deeply disturbed by the plight of people who were poor, ill, oppressed or ostracized. That is apparent from the stories we read of Jesus speaking up for people who were poor, healing people who suffered, reaching out to people on the margins, and from today's passage in which he stated the mission of his ministry.

After John baptized him in the Jordan River and he spent days in the wilderness resisting temptation, Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth. On the sabbath, he went to the synagogue, and at the proper moment, Jesus stood up to read. He had arranged for the scroll of the prophet Isaiah to be handed to him. Jesus unrolled it and read from the 61<sup>st</sup> chapter.

Like the other Hebrew prophets before him, Jesus was convinced that he was to be a mouthpiece for God. He was compelled to bring good news to the poor; to liberate those held captive – whether imprisoned by the state or bound by the chains of poverty; to open the eyes of those who were blind to God's ways; and to set free those who were being oppressed. Jesus was announcing that he was in accord with the prophets of old – not only Isaiah, but Moses, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, Micah, and others.

Today I invite you to come with me on a journey. In the coming weeks, we will peer into the life and message of several of the prophets. I'm calling this series of stops Prophetic Spirituality because it captures the essence of an authentic life of faith. Prophetic Spirituality is a merger of our two bridge players. To say that our faith is prophetic is to say that it is actively engaged in resisting evil, righting wrongs, and spreading love. To say that our faith is spiritual is to say that it is grounded in worship, prayer, and reflecting on God's message. It is to intertwine interior work with outward action so that we can go deeper with God and live the life God calls us to live.

Faithful religious communities like ours do far more than worship and provide programs for themselves. They march into places of suffering and share God's love with the lost and the least. They do more than wring their hands over the problems of poverty, violence, racism, mental illness, and drug abuse. They partner with God to change the world and transform people's lives. Worship and personal prayer are essential because they help us discern where God needs us to spread love, strive for justice, and work for peace.

Each week we will focus on one of the Jewish prophets, how Jesus echoes his message, and how that message addresses problems we are facing today. Along the way, we will also touch on modern day prophets and how their message and their courage inspire people to right living.

The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures were not fortune tellers. They predicted the future in the sense that they declared: "If we continue on the current path, it will lead to disaster." However, prophets were not fatalists who believed the future was carved in granite. Prophets often painted the future as a looming catastrophe to jar people awake to the urgency of the moment. They gave their best shot at shocking their audience so that people would act to avert disaster and to forge a better tomorrow. Could this be precisely what our world needs today?

Despite the shrill and vulgar that catch the media's attention and get retweeted endlessly, we can say "No" to what is cruel and unkind, and "Yes" to what is generous and beautiful. This is what the prophets call us to do.

Next week we encounter the message of Moses: "Let my people go!"

NOTES

1. These three alternatives were inspired by Joan Chittister in her book, *The Time Is Now*, (New York: Convergent Books, 2019), p. 13-14.

**Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson**

Spirit of God —  
who danced across primeval waters to awaken creation,  
who hovered over Jordan to bless your beloved Son,  
who descended on waiting disciples to empower your church —

In every age, you come among us.  
You come, like swirling wind, to refresh and renew.  
You come, like a heavenly dove, to claim and commission.  
You come, like flickering flame, to ignite and inspire.  
Descend upon us now, we pray, and baptize us with your grace.

Comforting Spirit —  
We give thanks that you abide with us,  
filling us with peace, sustaining us in hope,  
even interceding with sighs too deep for words.  
So we pray with confidence,  
trusting that you lean close to hear the petitions we voice  
and that you fill the silence when words fail us.

We lift before you the concerns of our hearts  
and long for your Spirit to hover once again  
over the chaos of our world.  
We pray for those dear to us  
who seek your healing in body, mind, or spirit.  
Strengthen those who are battling disease  
and draw those who mourn into your loving embrace.  
Give hope to those in the depths of despair  
and surround those overcome by worry with your peace.  
In the aftermath of Hurricane Dorian,  
we pray for those who were caught in its wake:  
those who packed up their lives and fled the storm,  
those who are left to survey the damage,  
those who have lost loved ones and livelihoods  
to the wind and the waves.  
Sweep over this hurting world  
and draw new creation out of the disorder and disarray.

Commissioning Spirit —  
We trust that, even as you hear our prayers,  
you are at work — among, within, and through your people —  
to respond to the suffering of this world.  
Long ago you anointed Jesus of Nazareth  
to bring good news to the poor  
and proclaim release to the captives.

Anoint us —  
whom you have claimed and called—  
to continue Christ's work, here and now.  
Melt us, mold us, fill us, and use us  
so that we might be creators of justice and joy,  
compassion and peace.  
By your grace, give us prophetic words,  
caring hearts, and helping hands,  
and empower us to build communities  
in which *all* people have a place at the table.

This we pray in the name of the Anointed One,  
who gave us words to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**