

How to Make A Prophet

Hosea 11:1-11

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When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Ba'als, and offering incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught E'phraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all. How can I give you up, E'phraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Ad'mah? How can I treat you like Zeboi'im? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy E'phraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. They shall go after the LORD, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD."

Hosea 11:1-11, NRSV

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

The Book of Hosea falls into that group of so-called Minor Prophets in the Hebrew Bible; co-called "minor" due to the brevity of their work in comparison to the Major Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Hosea lived and prophesied in the 8th century before the common era, or the birth of Christ, among the earliest prophets in our scriptural reference. He was a contemporary of Isaiah's father, the prophet Amos. Hosea's claim to fame, as it were, is that he is the first to talk about God's relationship with God's people in familial terms. And, as we read in this morning's passage, God speaks to Israel as a parent speaks to and about a child. Further, the relationship between the faithful Hosea and his prostitute wife Gomer is explicitly expressed as a metaphor for God's disappointing and trying relationship with sinful Israel. Hosea, who is not exactly a peach of a guy, never gives up on his unfaithful floozy of a wife who smites and betrays him over and over again; just so, God never abandons Israel despite her own pervasive depravity and sin. And although Hosea is full of deleterious drama and deceit, as well as sex and violence, it is ultimately a story about love. Unending, unyielding, undeterred, albeit often unrequited love; the kind of love that only God could sustain. The kind of redeeming love that defies all explanation, surpasses all understanding, and embraces all who are marked merely by God's image as it is etched on all hearts. It's a good read...in fact I'm surprised that there has not yet been an HBO original series called: "Hosea and his Wife and Children of Whoredom," which would simply be a direct quote from the second verse of the biblical Book itself. But then, all of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible have pretty good tales to tell.....

We have just begun to use the Revised Common Lectionary as our source for Sunday readings. The RCL was compiled in 1992 by an ecumenical group of Christians who were concerned to make the Gospel readings more inclusive for women and other marginalized creatures of God's creation. But the RCL also offers a new perspective on the Hebrew Bible. Instead of simply using the Hebrew Bible to support and illuminate the themes of the Gospel reading each week (which follows no pattern and provides no context or continuity for the former) the Revised Common Lectionary reads the Hebrew Bible, over the three year cycle, in an intentional order, so that we can get some sense of it as it stands on its own, and not just as it is in relation to the New Testament Gospels.

The first year of the cycle, Year A, features the readings of Genesis through Judges. The second year, Year B, features the readings of the Davidic covenant, the kings and monarchs, and the wisdom readings of Job, Proverbs, and the Song of Solomon. And the third year, this year, Year C, features the prophets; the major prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel; and the minor prophets of which there are 12 – and they include Amos (Isaiah's father), Hosea, Daniel, Joel, etc. We are scheduled to read from several different prophets during this month of August, and so I thought we might spend the next few weeks, during which time I have the privilege of this pulpit, to explore the concept, the theology, the ethics, and the reality of our own personal experiences with prophets and prophetic voices, not just in and through our scripture, but in and through our own lives.

The Hebrew word translated as *prophet* in the Bible is *navim*, and it can mean one who is called, but it can also mean one who is calling. This is an important duo-definition to keep in mind. Because it means that the prophet is not simply a commentator on the state or eventuality of affairs, but rather a part of the action as well, a catalyst for change. A prophet is one who is both called and calling.

It is important to remember that in our scripture, prophecy is not tantamount to clairvoyance. It is not about predicting the future or seeing or interpreting magical, mystical things. Generally speaking the job descriptions in the Hebrew Bible are thus: priests are responsible for instruction and teaching on the Torah; sages & wise ones are responsible for giving counsel and advice; and prophets are the keepers of The Word, God's Word. The prophets are responsible for making the Word of God come alive for the people of God. And so prophecy in the Hebrew Bible falls into one of two main categories: prophetic speech is either an exclamation of judgment or a proclamation of salvation. Prophets are either warning humanity of its brokenness or proclaiming God's redeeming love.....and always extolling the miracle that those things are not mutually exclusive. But take careful note, the currency of the prophetic message is rooted in the notion that human

beings have the power and agency to reconcile themselves with God. We are not at the mercy of some predestined plan or some circumstance out of our control. Prophets do not tell us what is going to happen regardless of our actions. Prophets rather give us the insight to live into God's hope of redemption through reconciliation...and the rest, my friends, is up to us....the decision is ours....prophet or loss.

The great Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel writes in his classic book *The Prophets*: "The prophet is a person, not a microphone....The prophet's task is to convey a divine view, yet as a person the prophet is a point of view. The prophet speaks from the perspective of God as perceived from the perspective of his/her own situation." (pg xii, *The Prophets II*) Prophets, therefore, are not supernatural beings. They are not purely objective, they do not speak from a sterile and absolute position. They are flesh and blood, heart and soul, human beings who have lived in this wicked world as we have lived. They are not unlike us. And so I ask you, who are the prophets in your life?

I have been blessed to know several prophets in my life, thus far. I just returned from Australia, where I have in recent years, had some truly profound personal encounters with people I would consider to be living prophets or agents of prophetic speech. I have been traveling to Australia on a regular basis since 2001 when I began working on a book about an Australia Anglican priest/nun/sculptor named Rev'd. Sr. Angela Solling. Angela was a fairly renowned sculptor in Australia when at the tender age of 29 she left her burgeoning art career and became an Anglican Poor Clare nun. She went on to found an entire community of Anglican Poor Clare nuns in the Australian outback, and through sheer force of personality and persistence designed and built an incredible mud brick monastery which is an architectural marvel to this day. She was one of the first women ordained in the Anglican church in Australia in 1992 and provided a home for the movement for women's ordination in the Anglican church at her Anglican monastery. And perhaps mostly amazingly of all, she integrated and partnered her ministry as an Anglican priest with that of an Aboriginal prophet named Minmia. Together, these two prophetic women conceived and built a healing center at the monastery, Gunya Chiara (literally house of light), that set about the hard work of reconciling battered and suffering women with themselves, the society that had battered and betrayed them, and God, whoever God was for each of them.

Unfortunately, Angela died of a massive brain hemorrhage in January of 2002. But Minmia has continued to honor the legacy of their prophetic Franciscan/Aboriginal union in her work to this day..

I first met Minmia at her workshop for women's spirituality in Sydney, Australia in September of 2001, when I began my research for the book on Angela, the woman Minmia called her "soul mate." Minmia is a senior keeper of the teachings of the indigenous Koori people who have inhabited the South Eastern coast of Australia since the rivers of the Dreaming began to flow. Minmia was born in the 1930's. Her mother was a full-blooded Aboriginal and her father was Caucasian. She was born in an Aboriginal community in New South Wales, and removed from her home at the age of six to be placed in a "Christian" Anglican mission community where she was grossly mistreated and horribly abused. As soon as she was old enough to leave, in her mid-teens, she did. Minmia was officially one of the "stolen generation" and her childhood memories are marred by the penetrating pain and deep-seeded distress that accompanies such abuse of souls in their earliest development. Minmia's prophesy of judgment and salvation is predicated on her own experience and not on some detached observation. She is a prophet made of loss.

In the 1960's Minmia was issued official government papers that granted her "semi-human" – as opposed to "sub-human" - (her words) status for the good fortune of having been born of a white father. She has spent the last thirty years as a teacher and consultant to the Australian Government on Aboriginal Affairs and a spiritual leader, supporting and honoring and passing along the traditions into which she was born and with which she has been, as she says, especially entrusted. Today she is a revered "Keeper of the Teachings." And I am continually surprised and inspired by the essential resemblance between the Koori Teachings kept and communicated by Minmia, and the Christian Teachings that have their roots in the biblical prophecies of Hosea and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Jesus.

Minmia tells the story of one gathering of Koori women early in her career as a consultant for the Australian government. A white woman held a black baby in her arms. The rest of the Koori women began shouting chants and jeers at her. The rabble escalated until Minmia finally picked up a heavy wooden stick and raised it to the child's head. She turned to the jeering crowd and shouted: "Okay, let's bash this bastard's skull in. Who wants to go first?" And of course the circle of women froze on the spot. The looks on their faces were horrified. Of course, no one wanted to go first. They had not really intended to hurt the child. Maybe they had not even intended to hurt his mother. In all likelihood, their cruelty had no particular intention at all. But it took Minmia's prophetic call...her reflection of their own behavior through a different lens to focus their attention on the gravity of their own behavior. And at once they were clearly confronted with the horror of their ways, and the Koori women opened their hearts and their circle to include the deviant mother and child.

This is what prophets do. They help us to see ourselves more clearly. They help us to reframe our closed up lives to be receptive to God's abundant and redeeming love.

I asked Minmia where she, as a Koori who had suffered mightily at the hands of Christians, and Sr. Angela, as an ordained member of the Christian clergy, managed to find enough common ground that they could refer to each other as "soul mates." Where were the deepest common roots of their faith, and how were the most disparate fractures between their two traditions recognized and recovered and reconciled? And her first response was, "religion talks, but spirituality walks, and Angela and I just put one foot in front of each other's." And this seems to be the theme of both their relationship, and their mutual prophesy. Walking together. It is a theme grounded in relationship and reconciliation. It is the theme that is ever-present in Minmia's Teaching, as well as the hallmark of her remarkable relationship with Sr. Angela. And it is the theme in the Book of Hosea. Walking together, together with each other and together with God.

Minmia once said to me: "When I met Angela, I stopped blaming God, because Angela was such an advocate for him."¹ Even prophets need prophets to show them the way.

Navim: one who is called and one who is calling. And we.....we are called first to listen, and maybe we will hear that we too are being called to do some of the calling. And this is how each and every one of us can make a prophet.

I would like to close with a prayer by my favorite prophetic Australian cartoonist/prayer master, Michael Leunig:

God bless those who explore in the cause of understanding;
Whose search takes them far from what is familiar and comfortable and leads them into danger or terrifying loneliness.
Let us try to understand their sometimes strange or difficult ways;
Their confronting or unusual language;
The uncommon life of their emotions, for they have been affected and shaped and changed by their struggle at the frontiers of a wild darkness, just as we may be affected, shaped and changed by the insights they bring back to us.
Bless them with strength and peace.
Amen.

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¹ Maureen Smith, April 2, 2003