

# Cynthia J. Dahlin: Prophecy in Our Small Acts

Sermon for Seekers Church

February 4, 2001

Cynthia J. Dahlin

## Prophecy in Our Small Acts

Each of the readings in the lectionary today refers to some act of prophesy.

I think that we are able to understand and imagine prophesy in its context in the Old Testament, and then can get confused pulling its meaning forward into the context in which we use the word in our church today. In the Old Testament, prophesy can be a mystical act, in which a seer, perhaps aided by some drugged incense, wine or trance-inducing dancing or whirling produces a wild, highly imaginative dream, and then snatches a crisp interpretation of doom for the society out of it, suddenly involving justice or justice at this final moment. As David Lloyd discussed last week in his sermon, there might be no connection to the prophet's own life or moral behavior. On the other hand, there might be a dream involved, as in Ezekiel's wheel in the sky, or dreams to interpret, as Joseph interpreted the Pharaoh's dream and as Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dreams.

Today, we use prophetic word to describe speech that describes justice, goes against the cultural norms of self-interest and closely identifies with the life and values of Jesus. In the Old Testament, it seemed that prophets were viewed as special, had access to the kings and leaders, and were supported by the people as important to the survival of the country. Today, we do not feel very popular when we speak prophetic

words—sometimes it seems that we disrupt joviality, and people move away. However, let us look at what we know about prophecy in the Old Testament times and now to see what lessons we might take.

Some Old Testament prophets could foresee the future or speak for God.

These prophets are chosen by God, as were Moses or Samuel, in special conversations others could not perceive, to speak to the rest of the people.

[Questions to children: Who remembers how Moses was called by God? – burning bush. How did God call Samuel? – Samuel was serving Eli, a priest, and was woken from his sleep and spoken to by God. Eli had to tell him it was God talking.] Several of the lesser prophets seem to be ordinary people who suddenly received detailed messages, and went to the capital city to deliver them to the people. These prophets included Hosea, Joel and Amos. Amos' words are introduced as follows: "The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa . . ." These people had to choose to disrupt their ongoing, comfortable life to listen to the message they were given and then to deliver it to the people.

We don't know whether there were any Old Testament people who decided to go back to sleep and ignore what was told to them, thinking perhaps it was just a bad dream, or that they'd be crazy to talk about what they'd heard God say to them. Here at Seekers, we try to listen to call, and discern what is being asked for us. We have the discipline of talking about call to others to try to avoid resisting what we are to do for too long. Marjory Bankson has a long chapter on Resistance, the first stage of call from God in her recent book, and we all know that if we resisted hearing and acting on God's words to us forever, the world would be a lot worse for it. The prophets in the Bible give us examples of those who listened and acted, so that we may have the courage and example of

their lives.

The next thing about prophesy I want to talk about is preparation to hear. I want to use the reading from Isaiah that we heard today. Isaiah was a respected prophet, supported by the kings in Jerusalem, who saw the wars and conquests going on in his time as God working out punishments for countries who acted unjustly. Isaiah was active from about 740-701, and wrote Chapters 1-35 of the Book of Isaiah. The later books, 36-66 were written by his school of followers after his death. I want to read Isaiah 6:1-7, about Isaiah's vision of being brought to God and having his lips purified by seraphs with a burning coal, and then continue with the content of the prophesy which emerged:

*"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings; with two, they covered their faces, and with two, they covered their feet, and with two, they flew. One called to another and said: "Holy, holy holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the threshold shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; Send me!" And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mind of this people dull and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes and listen with their ears, and*

*comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed." Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" and he said: "Until the cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled."*

The holy seed is its stump. How popular do you think that message was? Isaiah told the people that their cities would be desolated, and that God would get rid of nearly all of the people. Moreover, God did not want the people to understand that God was judging them in some way and change to become better people – on the contrary, God was saying that their senses would be dulled so that they could not change or repent and escape their fate. Their minds would be made dull, and they would be made blind and deaf! Isaiah received this difficult message only after his mouth was purified, cauterized with a hot coal in his dream.

The question for us today is: how do we purify ourselves to be able to receive God's messages, whether good or bad? Prophets in ancient times dressed differently, perhaps in rags or simple clothes, sacrificed to the Gods and prayed often. At least we should believe that prayer for openness and worthiness to hear might be essential to hearing what God has to say for us. I think that God waits for us to be ready to listen, and we must ask to hear before we will hear God's messages. Part of our prayer must be self-cleansing, like the burning coal. We must want to hear and must have clean open hearts to receive what is there for us. I know that this is evident to those who receive spiritual reports in the community, or who have listened for God in a discernment process about call or another decision.

When I did training in Clinical Pastoral Education, we were

trained to clear our minds and pray between visiting each patient. But it is a step in spiritual readiness that Jesus pointed to when he said "seek and ye shall find, ask and it shall be given." Praying and asking for God's guidance and presence comes before prophesy.

Some Old Testament prophets wore a sign or enacted a sign to give their message in actions to let others interpret, or which they interpreted later –kind of like Seekers tries to have experiential learning when we can.

Isaiah went naked at God's command for three years at one point, and at the end of this time, he was given the interpretation that the Assyrians would conquer Egypt and Ethiopia and lead away their people to exile naked to be slaves. In our gospel from Luke today, Jesus asks Simon Peter to take him out in his boat away from the crowds which were following him so that he could teach while having a bit of space between himself and the people. He taught and then asked the disciples, who had fished all night to put their nets out. They did, caught so many fish that their boats began to sink, and Jesus prophesied. He did not say, "follow me and you'll catch more fish," but rather he did this sign to get their attention to prophesy. "From now on you will be catching people." Jesus did a sign and then interpreted that sign as an act of prophesy. I believe that we at Seeker's often do small acts of prophesy, and it is important that we name them to each other. The Building Development Committee has faithfully bought us a building, and brought us to the point of renovating it to fit our needs and the needs of the community around us. Marjory and David write a magazine and support workshops to remind regular people that their work can support God's plan for the world.

We all support a community that helps us all to know each other deeply in a world that would rather have us identify ourselves as consumers.

Kids can prophesy, too. If you sit by a kid who has been left out at school, you are showing that you do not think that is fair, and making it obvious to others that they could have resisted being mean as well. You can remember that there are poor people who need both short-term help and long term justice and get everyone's attention by making lunches for the homeless or giving Christmas gifts to kids who otherwise wouldn't have them. These small acts are prophesy – God speaking through each of us to the world.

[Seekers] [Write us] [[Seekers Sermons](#)] [[Fair Use](#)]

---

Blessing For The Work Of The Seekers Building Development Task Group Sunday, Feb. 4, 2001

Exodus 25:1-8: "The Lord said to Moses: Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt them to give you shall receive the offering for me. This is the offering that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, blue, purple and crimson yarns and fine linen, goat's hair, tanned rams' skins, fine leather, acacia wood, oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, onyx stone and gems to be set in the ephod and for the breast-piece. And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell with them."

Today we want to honor, as a whole community, the tremendous amount of careful, caring work that the Building Development Task Group has done to bring our hopes for a new building to the very concrete point of being ready to sign a contract with a Construction firm.

From calling the community together to envision our sacred space and other uses for the building, to finding an architect, then coming up with concrete floor plans and options to help us see what our various choices meant, to finalizing a design and making all the decisions it took to

get that design approved, and working with our architect to realize a set of final drawings,

This task group has worked with faith and purpose for our greater good.

Would the members of the Building Development Task Group please come forward and form a circle.

Now would you please turn around and face outward.

KEITH – We bless and honor your work as the conveyor of the group, the primary link with our architect, Sarah Woodhead, the one who carried the project through the public approval process, and led it to fruition in these detailed drawings. Thank you.

AMEILIA – We bless your work as the visionary of hospitality, and designer and keeper of the kitchen.

STEVE – We bless and honor your work as a presence and support to the group, taking whatever tasks needed someone to look after it at the time, such as keeping Jane Leiper's piano for us during this time.

BRENDA – We give thanks that in addition to your work opening the building for many inspections and contractor visits so that we could become true owners of it in our heart, you were also there to work with and support Keith in every step of the work.

DOUG – We bless your work as a faithful presence and participant in whatever was needed, most recently working with Brenda to research security alarms to keep our new spiritual home safe.

DEBORAH – We bless and honor your work in giving us the theological underpinnings to the importance of planning our sacred space in a prayerful way, focusing on the design of the sanctuary.

GLEN – We bless your vision of opening the space to music and performance, making our church an "asset for the community." Thank you for your attention to wiring, lights, sound systems, and all that would mean to allowing music and performance to break forth from Seekers Church.

PAUL – We bless you for carrying the concerns of the children in the Task Group. Thank you for caring about classrooms, play space, green space as well as holding up the issues of responsible use of our money as stewards to a word with poverty and injustice.

PAT – We bless you as a bringer of experience in the building of space for public use, helping us to think about making the building easy to use, down to remembering we have to hang our coats somewhere when we enter in. We thank you for investing your time in looking at every drawing in detail, a necessary work which will bring us great joy when we find doors and light switches when we need them!

BILL AND MICHELE – We bless your work in bringing us the recent experience you both gained building a church, especially in understanding that our visions and hopes might diverge from their ultimate expression in bricks and mortar and helping us to work to get what we need most in our new building.

PETER – We bless you as the holder of the process of committee work, he who watched to see all were heard, and that the process sped up or slowed down to take in the needs of those participating.

JEFFREY – We bless you as the communicator to the Takoma community, watching the e-lists, meeting our future neighbors, the coffee house owners.

Groups need initial energy to get them going as well as the long-term task oriented energy, and we bless the participation of Rachel Halterman, Roy Barber, Kate Amoss, and Jean Adams



for giving the group the added energy of their support as long as they felt called to it.

Would the Building Development Task Group members please raise up your banner, creating a tabernacle to take in and house all of Seekers Community.

1 Kings 6:11-13 Now the word of the Lord came to Solomon, "Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes, obey my ordinances, and keep all my commandments by walking in them, then I will establish my promise with you, which I made to your father David. I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel."