

*Prophesied***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered November 8, 2020**

What a week its been! I can't tell you how difficult it was for me to wake up each day and watch the electoral votes not moving one way or the other. Nevada, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Georgia I apologize for everything I said about you. For me, it was like peeling a band aid off my hairy arm--slowly and painfully. My rational self understood why patience was needed. As President Elect Biden stated, "each vote was a person participating in democracy and needed to be counted." We were all sitting on the edge of our seats and biting our nails. We knew what was at stake. We knew the possibility of hope, of justice, of compassion was so close. And then Saturday morning, or was it afternoon, we received word of a promising presidency. The waiting, the anxiety, the longing ended. I must tell you, though I was satisfied I was left feeling emotionally deflated. For four years I have been on the edge. For four years I have been on alert, building a ministry battling racism, injustice, bigotry, hate, unfairness, and corruption and comforting those caught up in the battle urging them to hang in and hang on. When all of that felt lifted, I was left with a feeling of exhaustion, yet a feeling that I had been freed. I wonder if you felt the same way.

Yes, we have reason to celebrate. But after the balloons have deflated and after we've swept the confetti away, we have work to do. Change does not happen with only an election. This is why I say we are the prophets of our time. It is by our work, our compassion, our seeking for justice and equity, our prophetic witness that we can produce outcomes. It is an incredible responsibility and I'm sure we are sometimes reluctant to call ourselves prophets of our time. When modern folks talk about "prophets" and "prophecy," they're often referring to someone foretelling future events. However, in scripture, the prophets played a much larger role. Religiously, we've learned that prophets are humans who speak on God's behalf. Some of their messages are more dramatic than others: some prophets (like Ezekiel and Zechariah) see elaborate visions, while others simply call the people to remember their allegiance to Israel's God and the Torah (like Malachi). In scripture, and especially in the Old Testament, a prophet has the role of holding people accountable to the God of Israel. They do this through the ministry of prophecy.

When you encounter prophecy in scripture, it usually refers to a message claiming to be of divine nature or origin. Since most of the Bible focuses on the ancient Israelites' relationship with their God, it makes sense that most of the Bible's prophecy comes from the same God. These messages come in many forms: dreams, poetry, sermons, and even dramatic physical stunts—like in Isaiah when the prophet Isaiah went nude for three years to signify how the Assyrians would strip and shame the Egyptians. Just so we are clear I am discouraging that. Although it's easy to think of prophecy as a message concerning the future, the prophets of the Bible speak of the past, present, and future and so should we. Historically, true prophets spoke out about injustice and exploitation. They spoke when people went astray and forgot the poor. They

punched up. Not down. They spoke truth to power, not condemnation to the downtrodden and marginalized.

There are a whole lot of people who call themselves "prophets" today. But most of them barely acknowledge poverty, exploitation, or injustice. Jesus knew this, and that's why he warned that there will always be a bunch of false prophets and false teachers running their mouths off who will "deceive many people" (Mt. 24:11). Historically, there were two types of prophets. Firstly, there were those who feasted at the King's table because they had been co-opted to speak well of evil leaders. They were always bringing these smarmy words of favor and influence and prosperity to the king. And the king lapped it up. Secondly, there were those who were exiled to the caves, or beheaded (like John the Baptist) because they spoke out about the injustice or immorality of their leaders. The king didn't like them very much. He tried to have them knee-capped.

I would suggest to you that, the leaders of the religious right in America and so-called "prophetic leaders" of the charismatic and evangelical church have become the false prophets of this generation. When you offer support and resources to those in power and oppress and become a mechanism for divisiveness you are no longer able to claim prophecy. Therefore, I call us prophets of our time. In our Unitarian Universalist faith we live change, we work to change, and offer prophetic witness to all that ails our community, our country, and the world. We warn others. Listen to the words of the prophets. You will hear our Unitarian Universalist cries:

Amos the prophet warned, "Hear this, you who trample the needy and destroy the poor of the land!"

Isaiah the prophet "Seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause."

Jeremiah the prophet "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice"

Ezekiel the prophet "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy."

Micah the prophet "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

Zechariah the prophet " ... do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the immigrant, or the poor..."

A prophet is someone who is willing to face the fact that we are in a predicament and it's only as we co-participate with our better selves, our spiritual selves, our community of prophets can we find ourselves moving in the direction of a beloved community. So, when I think about what it means to be prophetic, I think it means to identify with some clarity and boldness the kinds of political economic practices that contradict the purposes of our faith, and if they contradict the purposes of our faith, they will come to no good end. So, if you think about economic injustice or if you think about ecological abuse of the environment, it is the path of disaster. And the prophets of the Old Testament traced the path of disaster and it seems to me that our work now is to trace the path of disaster in which we are engaged. The amazing thing about the prophets is that they were able to pivot after they had done that to talk with confidence that their faith was working out an alternative world of well-being and justice and peace and security in spite of the contradiction. So, they were in the ancient world, they were courageous, and the prophets that we can identify now have the same kind of courage. As prophets of our time we have that courage.

If you can declare something in the here and now about the human predicament, take seriously what is going on in our world, that we live in death-dealing circumstances that marginalize, victimize those persons who are already vulnerable and in America, you have such a dichotomy between the privileged and the disenfranchised that it's really pronounced to me where the predicaments are. So, if we're going to talk about prophetic consciousness, I don't think that means some mystical apparatus. I think it means the capacity to imagine the world seen through the eyes of our Unitarian Universalist faith becoming the prophets of our time.

Liberal Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann tells us, "I think people think being prophetic is just nagging people about social justice and you wear people out nagging them and what that misses on the one hand is social analysis. You're just nagging about social justice if you don't do social analysis, and the other side of it is that prophetic faith is elementally hopeful that something better is intended and will come to fruition. That generally is missed among liberals about being prophetic."

Are we ready to wake up and continue to do the work more fiercely and faithfully than ever? And let's be clear: this is not a politically partisan thing; liberals and conservatives both have a ton of waking up to do. One unemployed Michigan factory worker was quoted after the election saying, "I vote Republican because I won't vote for anyone who doesn't see and respect me." On the other side of the political fence, black, Latino, Muslim and LGBT families are struggling with real fear about what's been unleashed and what may be unleashed against them. And they are wondering if this country will wake up to and take their fear seriously.

Bottom line: we need prophetic communities now more than ever. As Unitarian Rebecca Parker says, we need circles of brave and bold people who are willing "to see what is happening, to say what is happening and to act in accordance with what they know." Which means that being a community of prophecy is not just about helping people wake up to each other's realities and fears; there is also the matter of waking up to and being wide-eyed about the need for resistance. Most of the time, holy work is about finding common ground among differing worldviews. But

sometimes, holy work is about prophetic judgment and knowing when some views need opposed. As that activist said, "I am not crushed. I am awake."
So many ways to wake up. So many people who need us to do so. Let us be awake. In the end, maybe that is the most prophetic message of all.

May it be so.