

Prophets #3: Mysticism, Spirituality & Us

Preface: This topic was meant to be the last, after the Introduction, Apocalypticism, and Social Justice.

- My story in brief – unlikely candidate to be a prophet
- Conventional upbringing as 3rd generation Greek-American in St. Louis in large GO congregation, middle-class extended family, college. Shy, introvert; awkward making friends; runs away from conflict
- Profound experience during college – move from science to religion; fraternity buddies made fun of my voice: bad singer, cracked when addressing crowd!
- Seminary, Mt. Athos, graduate work in Old Testament (Biblical Hebrew), marriage
- Teaching, ordination: university, seminary, parish
- Long road with twists & turns as clergyman and believer – mid-life crisis, professional therapy; deepening of faith practices through spiritual direction; wide reading ecumenically & interfaith; passion for academy and community of faith

Mysticism = experience of God in life, which can be (on rare occasions) extraordinary & exceptional or (most often) ordinary & mundane.

- available to all, not limited to great Mystics (whom it would be wise for us to study)
 - Sacrament of the ordinary: daily life
 - Sacrament of the extraordinary: irruptions of God unexpectedly and powerfully seeking us (compare Jonah fleeing to Tarshish)
- Our starting point: experience of shattering reality of God
- Classic: Isaiah 6 - I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs [6-winged fiery serpent] 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. And 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 thresholds 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!"
- Experience of the absolute that relativizes everything in organized religion: temple, priesthood, texts, pious habits, institutions.
- *Can you share an experienced of either the extraordinary presence of God or something ordinary, perhaps daily?*

Spirituality –

- Breath/presence of the Spirit of God in our lives as persons & communities. Fact: we are always dealing with God every second, whether we like it or not, are aware or not, believe or not! Breath, life, cosmos...
- Gift of grace through faith – inner life of soul, mind, heart
- learning how to trust inner this Spirit, Gift poured out; Kingdom present here and now (down-payment for Christians)
- Spirit implanted in us as teacher, comforter, advocate
- Inner knowing – intuitive, learned, with great deal of correction
- We are all now beloved sons/daughters of God

Key text: Ex 34:6-7 crucial description of God

- The LORD passed before [Moses], and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."
- *Willing to share your own experience of God's mercy, grace, patience (suffering), love, faithfulness, forgiveness?*
- We cannot pass on (tradition) what we have not received – not words but lived experience that is both intimately personal and deeply tied to the community
- Total, unconditional love of God - different from conditional loves of world
- Dramatic forgiveness for our sin, failure to live as God wants. How we try to run away from this, minimize it, qualify or justify.
 - Paradox of divine love: forgiveness amounts to breaking rules
 - Pastor: explicit seeking forgiveness publicly from congregation in Liturgy!
 - Rite of Forgiveness – Sunday before Lent begins: how some try to avoid!
- Further, if we do not learn our woundedness and seek healing, we will transmit it to next generation. Well established by psychology – addiction (alcohol; work; success), lack of storge (parental love & acceptance); trauma (the earlier the harder to heal – emotional, physical, sexual, verbal, physical) – worst is Attachment Deficit Disorder; throw away kids into orphanages; honor, shame & blame of immigrant culture...
- We are all wounded people at stages & in different ways: childhood, young adulthood, marriage, community, society, nation. *How well do you know your own woundedness?*

Our communities of faith in the world – place for truth in love?

- West – religion has > system for secure belonging rather than safe place of transformation
 - Birth, ethnicity, culture
 - Assumptions abound: God, faith, piety, practices, community, society, world
- Willing to admit our lack of spiritual maturity?

- Who among us is willing to attend synagogue/church worship regularly and on time, learn as adults from elders, observe practices as persons and families, be formed (and continually changed) by Biblical vision of Kingdom of God?
- America – under-values quietness, inward, spiritual development in favor of extrovert accomplishment, intelligence, street smarts
- Beware of psychic numbing – to joys and pains of world
 - Consider bland conversations in fellowship (weather, sports, politics, possessions – house, car, vacation)
 - “Reality TV shows”; video games
- Structural group conversion – rather than exclusive focus on own sinfulness, etc
- Most – well-intentioned and good but within structure/framework that restricts rather than liberates

Our Task as beloved sons/daughters of true God in covenant:

- Recover unique prophetic dimension of Judeo-Christian heritage
- Speaking the truth in love while growing close to the heart of God within our sacred traditions and communities as faithful followers who are continually learning & growing
- Requires being prepared to *live on edge of the inside* (rather than become outsiders who tell everyone how to change)
 - Very narrow road that is rare
 - Requires great purification
 - Very few go this way
 - Results: driven away, ignored/marginalized, or collapse under weight of pressure to conform and become company men/women (repeat official line)

One resource: monastic inheritance - successors of biblical prophets!

- Protest movement of the Holy Spirit -- charismatic
 - against society -- easy compromise of Church with world
- “Society . . . was regarded [by the Desert Fathers] as a shipwreck from which each single individual man had to swim for his life . . . These were men who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster.” -- Thomas Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 3
- New form of martyrdom when period of blood martyrdom ended
- Basis: Acts of Apostles, Gospel commands (radical observance)
- On edge of Church as institution: desert & empire as perennial antinomies of history
- Communities – intentional; great resource & counterbalance to pressure of ecclesial institutions with unresolved tension: bishop & abbot, priest & hermit
- We in the world – w/o making formal vows we have much to learn about:
 - Poverty – detachment from money & possessions
 - Chastity – disciplined pleasure
 - Stability – restfulness (vs. restlessness of our age)
 - Obedience – surrender our desire to be in control, give up power: *hardest of all!*

- Learn faithful solidarity in intentional community (choice of adults)
- In Christian East – great gift to modern, Western world of high productivity, never-ending competition, instant entertainment, global communication, explosion of data: Prayer & contemplation

My appeal: re-integration of two classic practices of Judeo-Christian heritage that we are in the early stages of recovery now: Contemplation & action

- Contemplation – silence, solitude, meditation, quietness (hesychasm), stillness that lead to new vision of reality (both everyday & exceptional):
- God active in the details of here and now! How we become everyday mystics! This is reality, not fantasy; objectivity through trust in God, not mere subjectivity even if it cannot be placed under microscope or cross-examined in court of law.
- Change of consciousness, way of seeing/perceiving/finding meaning in everyday events of life
 - See beyond our own community, heritage
 - All is sacred trust
 - One-ness of life: union, communion
 - New kind of presence: new eyes, words (of God)
 - Vs. complacency, non-commitment, smug satisfaction
 - Courage to model new way of life
 - Risky activity: face God, world, self
 - Passionate commitment to human community & creation (vs. “that’s not my business” or “I’m too busy” or “so what?”)
 - Monasteries at their best among Orthodox – factories of prayer and contemplation; spiritual gold: wise, experienced elders, inviting communities of unconditional love, joy, virtue

See all new around us – connect with all

- Carry world in our hearts: joy & sorrow, pleasant & ugly, pleasure & pain
- Becoming eye in the midst of the hurricane: still, calm, alert, sensitive
- Re-discovery of time & space: natural & spiritual. As we come to terms with basic poles of creation, we more naturally become human, faithful no matter what the external circumstances – regular & rhythmic, unusual, stressful, joyful, pleasant, painful. We are no longer passive victims of external circumstances nor internal ones (anxiety, stress, grief, despondency)
- Action – emerges from inner development of the spirit/heart/mind that uses gifts and resources provided by God to manifest in-breaking Kingdom
 - Different from frenzied, anxious, stressful, competitive, production-oriented culture of America

Great Need: Spiritual maturity (continual, dynamic growth in God)

- A title that says it all: *Long Obedience in the Same Direction* – Eugene Peterson

- Opposite of assumptions & inheritance, fast food, quick fix, instant data & communication
- Recover wisdom as distinct from intelligence, hard work, drive to excel, giftedness, common sense
- This and this alone will give us the ability/grace to discern true prophetic voices from false ones, and not the commentary of our favorite news outlet!
- Our main media channel: one, true God who has bequeathed sacred Scripture within Tradition of living, unbroken community of faith mediated through Prophets

Christian way: Gifts of Spirit in 1 Cor 12, Rom 12, Eph 4

- Find our own gift and develop it
- Prophecy consistently listed either 2nd or 1st—signifies grave importance of speaking God's view of reality here and now (divine interpretation of human affairs)
- All receive charism/gift – inherent, natural, w/o credentials
 - Chrismation in EO Tradition
 - For common good vs self interest
- Need to learn how to use it well in order to place selves in hands of God (instruments – compare parent teaching child to write) rather than to re-place God (perennial temptation of those who desire change)

One example of prophetic living

- listening to the community of faith – especially sorrows and giving them a voice.
 - Groans that may be inarticulate; cry of deep distress or pain that does not always reveal its source of cause.
 - Great sensitivity to pain, distress
 - These are unmistakable signs: all is not well! Something is terribly wrong! This is not how God wants things to be!
- How much do we listen to the pains and distress of each other as brothers & sisters (within Christian community & with Jewish community) –married, separated, estranged, divorced, single, widowed, poor, displaced, shunned, troubled?
 - Does not nullify the extent of our faithfulness, dedication, sacrifice, hard work, spiritual growth as spiritual leaders working with others
 - How easy to make light of these, dismiss (just get busy), judge others as weak...

Learning to become non-partisan in a society that is increasingly polarized & insulated: political, economic, social, religious

- Republican, Democrat, Green, Independent
- Conservative, middle of road, liberal
- Right wing and left wing

Speak truth to power, regardless of the ruler's political persuasion.

Lovingly criticize our own group, recognizing our own complicity in a sinful system (injustice, idolatry, immorality, violence).

- Well known saying: “those who risk nothing risk much more.”
- Versus – quiet, acceptable, safe life
- This is not a comfortable way of living but it’s the prophetic inheritance!

Today in our western culture in America

- M.L. King –
 - Interprets racial issues within vision of kingdom of God
 - vs. Vietnam War – lost 1/3 of followers
- Archbishop Iakovos – one of only 2 white men depicted with King at Selma on the memorable cover of Life magazine in 1965. Years later, he said that this decision was “against the advice of his clergy and staff, who worried correctly that I would be called traitor to the quest of marginalized Greeks for full acceptance as Americans. Not a single member of the Orthodox community appeared for scheduled events at my next stop, and I found himself alone in a Charleston hotel room ... telling hostile callers nationwide that I was compelled to go to Selma by formative memories of Greek suffering on my native Aegean islands under harsh occupation by the Ottoman Turks.”
- Mother Theresa of Calcutta before Harvard commencement audience – epidemic of loneliness in West; White House - sanctity of life from womb to tomb
- Edwin Friedman - Rabbi, Therapist, Leadership Consultant (died 1996)
 - *A Failure of Nerve--Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* – challenging thesis: widespread weak leadership in the U.S. in all areas: politics, religion, education, business, medicine
- *Whom do you consider a prophetic voice today and why?*

Enormity of world: Cosmos – far larger, mysterious, and older than ever conceived before

- Billions of people on planet now – and growing; Complexity of life
- Renewed appreciation of the Psalmist who declares: When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? *Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet...* (Ps. 8:3-6 NRS)

Presence today

- God to Ezekiel (ch. 2): “Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD.’ Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.”
- Smallness is blessing – e.g., those at cross, myrrhbearers at tomb
- Prophetic task is not and has never been “strength in numbers”
- Margaret Meade (cultural anthropologist, died 1978): “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”