

“The Time Tunnel” – February 5, 2017

Preached by Ministerial Intern D. Scott Cooper at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento.

First Reading: Excerpt from “The Second Source” in *Sources of Our Faith, Inspirational Readings* by Kathleen Rolenz

Second Reading: “Prophets” by Clinton Lee Scott

The Time Tunnel – a presentation about Time and Profits – it sounds like a Project Management PowerPoint seminar for mid-level managers. But it’s not. But it promises to be just as fascinating.

I’m not talking about the return-on-investment kind of profit, p-r-o-f-i-t, I’m talking about prophet, p-r-o-p-h-e-t. You may think of prophet as one of those antique biblical terms of ambiguous definition and little relevance. I say ambiguous definition because every place I looked defined prophet differently – sometimes very differently. Would most people even know what to do if they were told to “be prophetic”?

A prophet is often described as “a person who serves as a channel of communication between the human and divine worlds.” Another source phrases it “a person who speaks for God or a deity.”¹ Prophets have often been regarded as predictors of the future, and moral and ethical innovators; but prophets were usually more intent on forthtelling - speaking to present circumstances than to foretelling - speaking to future ones.²

After reading various essays, and upon reflection, I came up with three common denominators of those considered to be prophets, all through time from the Hebrew Bible down to this last century. Here’s my set of three qualities of a prophet – A. they spoke truth to power, B. they spoke up for the oppressed, and C. they had moral authority.

Rev. Lucy and I attended an Interfaith Breakfast a few weeks ago. You get to meet cool people and there’s free food. A rabbi sitting next to me commented how she has been recently surprised opening the Hebrew Bible, and reading how the writings of the Hebrew prophets from centuries ago are sounding so current. Prophets speaking out against corrupt power structures and standing up for the oppressed.

My first semester of seminary, I took a Hebrew Bible class. I had trouble keeping straight the chronological order of events we discussed. It didn’t help that I always had to stop and remember that the bigger number years happened prior to the lower number

¹ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/prophet?s=t>

² HarperCollins Bible Dictionary, Prophet.

years – 1900 BCE happened before 1700 BCE. I'm very visual and asked the professor for a timeline.

He was hesitant to do so. He explained that ancient civilizations metaphor of time was more cyclical, not linear as ours is. Another set of three: Ways of thinking about Time: Roman Numeral I: Cyclical Metaphor of Time: Ancient peoples were astonishingly observant and precise at recording the cycles of the seasons, and the stars and planets. [Why? Because they weren't looking down at smartphones.] Things that happened this time last month or this time last year in the sky, or with the weather, could often be observed happening again.

So, he explained, looking at a cyclical metaphor with a linear mindset makes it easy to misinterpret their writings and intentions. For instance, mistakenly extrapolating from their writings that the earth is 6000 years old. Not that anyone would do that.

This makes it interesting that the rabbi sitting next to me at breakfast saw current meaning in the writings of the prophets' centuries ago. The words of the Hebrew prophets can be as useful and inspirational today because, sadly, some circumstances closely mirror those times.

But, the Hebrew people didn't think of time as strictly a cycle, they had the Book of Genesis describing a beginning. And later, Christians added to these creation myths a second coming of Jesus to mark the end of time here on earth. Hence the linear concept – Roman Numeral II - a linear metaphor of time that we're more used to these days. Like the song said, "the river flows and time it rolls right on."

Mathematicians among you will know that two points determine a line. And many people have believed that later points on the timeline would be more just and more righteous than the original point. "And maybe what's good gets a little bit better and maybe what's bad gets gone."³

Religious liberals more than a hundred years ago believed that humanity was going to just keep on getting better and better, more moral, more generous, more just. But then the World Wars were undeniable evidence that people could be as cruel, hateful, and yes, evil as ever. We hadn't progressed as far as we'd imagined or hoped. By the end of the wars, only the most optimistic and prophetic seemed to believe that the timeline and moral arc were indeed bending toward justice.

Perhaps if we could go back in time and prevent those wars. I remember when I was a kid, a TV show called The Time Tunnel. I don't remember much about it, except it came on after Batman or The Green Hornet, and of course, people on the show were able to go back in time. What would you do if you could go back in time? Would you invest in Apple and Microsoft as they were just getting started, or maybe tell Lincoln to avoid live theatre?

³ "It Goes Like It Goes" is a song written by David Shire and Norman Gimbel.

If we went back in time, we could, as the popular current phrase goes, “stand on the right side of history.” We could march against the Redcoats, march with the Suffragettes or march at Selma. We wouldn’t have to wonder and trust our gut if we were doing the right thing, we would already know who had been proven moral.

Sometimes we assume more people were on the right side of history than actually were. “Always it is easier to pay homage to prophets than to heed the direction of their vision.” They weren’t able to go back in time down the Time Tunnel knowing how things would turn out. “Grandchildren of those who stoned the prophet sometimes gather up the stones to build the prophet’s monument.”⁴

In 1968, the focus of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was on poverty, which led to organizing the Poor People’s Campaign. Many are shocked to learn that during these Civil Rights struggles only 13% of even black churches supported Dr. King. Many churches feared or were otherwise intimidated from showing support of his movement.⁵

A little over a hundred years prior to that, In September, 1850, the U.S. Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law. The law not only provided for the return of fugitive slaves to their masters in the South, but also required private citizens in the North to assist in their capture. Abolitionists in Boston immediately began organizing resistance to the law. Unitarian minister Theodore Parker was one of the founders of a Vigilance Committee, which included blacks as well as whites, and was designed to protect "the colored inhabitants of Boston from any invasion of their rights."

Parker wrote an angry letter to President Fillmore and he made it clear that he would obey the laws of God, even if it meant breaking the laws of men.

Believe it or not, Millard Fillmore, the President who had signed the Fugitive Slave Law, was also a Unitarian who hated slavery. But he believed upholding the law for the time being was the only way to keep the Union together. He had sworn to uphold the Constitution of the United States, and he had promised to abide by the decisions of the Congress, and they had passed the law. He threw the weight of his influence onto enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law because he believed that safeguarding the Union was his sworn duty as President.⁶

By my definition, Theodore Parker and Martin Luther King, Jr. were both prophets. A., they spoke truth to power, B. they spoke up for the oppressed, and C. They had moral authority.

⁴ “Prophets” by Clinton Lee Scott

⁵ <https://theurbanblogg.wordpress.com/2013/03/08/only-13-black-churches-supported-dr-king/>

⁶ <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/toolbox/session8/109685.shtml>

Indeed, the second of the UU Sources of our Living Tradition is “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” And as it turned out, those prophetic women and men spoke for not only for their own time but for times to come. If you have ever wondered what you would do back in other times, via a trip down the Time Tunnel, when people needed to speak truth to power, and people needed to stand up for the oppressed, don’t worry, look around, you have another chance.

After thinking about this whole circular, linear Time Tunnel thing for a while, an idea occurred to me. You’ve been waiting for Roman Numeral III. It seemed logical to use a metaphor that acknowledges that we seem to repeat patterns in history, but that things aren’t entirely circular - while we do repeat patterns and find ourselves responding to the same problems, they are not the exact same experiences. Let me give you an example:

Peasants in biblical times found themselves combatting something referred to as debt bondage. Paying less than a living wage is not a new innovation. Their frequent pressing need for credit made them constantly dependent on creditors. Peasants found it impossible to get out of debt with the upper class, and the story has continued down through history.

In the early part of this country’s history, employees, little more than slaves to mining and railroad companies, were in perpetual debt to the company store who charged the laborers far more than they made. Today, payday loan stores are prevalent in strip malls in low income neighborhoods and charge exorbitant interest to those who can least afford it. Powerful people still take advantage of the oppressed.

But we are in some sense traveling from one end of a line to the other as well. The Linear metaphor, Roman Numeral II. And I do believe that as slow as it may be, we are getting better – that arc is bending toward Justice – we are moving upward as well forward.

I put all this together and came up with a new metaphor – Roman Numeral III. It’s a Slinky. There is a beginning and ending, but things keep swinging back around to a similar place. And if we stretch this out, imagine how long this is – the arc is long, and it is bending towards Justice. Sometimes the levels seem close together, and we’re not making a lot of progress, and sometimes they’re farther apart, and we seem to be really making headway.

But the really cool thing is, as we swing back around to similar experiences, we can look down at the previous levels and learn from earlier examples. That’s why it’s a spiral and not a circle. We can heed the words from prophets down through history, as the Rabbi observed. Here we are rounding the bend, looking upon prophets of

yesteryear to gather wisdom and strength. Perhaps the most quoted line from a Hebrew Prophet is this one from Micah:

“and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”⁷ I realized while finishing this sermon that this famous line tracks to my A, B, and C, the three descriptors of prophets I mentioned earlier. It’s an eighth-century prophet version of a twenty-first century UU description: Do justice, speak truth to power; Love kindness, stand up for the oppressed; walk humbly with your God, live into your moral authority.

I realize that the last one may give people here pause. Do we have moral authority? During the past several decades the Religious Right, often described as neither, has co-opted moral language in our political and cultural discourse. However, we are among the ones coming together to deepen our lives and to be a force for healing in the world. You don’t have to look very far to see people who claim to be moral and religious but whose actions do not reflect those things. When our actions do, which I hope is very consistently, we are the ones with moral authority.

And here’s where the unnerving part of the Time Tunnel Slinky comes in. People further up the Time Tunnel Slinky will one day look down at us, at the prophetic members of UUSS in 2017, and claim their moral authority, speak truth to power and stand up for the oppressed spurred by our decisions to do those very same things.

Be Prophetic. Those watching us from any direction of the Time Tunnel will see us doing the right thing. The time is very clearly now.

⁷ Micah 6:8