

“The Words of the Prophets are Written on the Subway Walls and Tenement Halls”  
 Proper 9B (July 8, 2018)  
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>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word. Amen<<

On Thursday Reuters published an interesting story about two dolphins that predicted a Russian World Cup quarter-final soccer win over Croatia.<sup>1</sup> The prophetic dolphins named Mitya and Solnyshko “were thrown round discs depicting the flags of the two countries in their pool and had to bring them back. Both came back at the same time for a 1-1 draw after the first run before the Russian flag was returned faster by Mitya in the last two throws for a predicted 3-1 Russia victory on Saturday.” It was a thrilling game yesterday, but sadly, Mitya was wrong. Russia lost to Croatia in penalty kicks. Like Punxsutawney Phil - the groundhog who gets dragged out of hibernation every February 2nd to look for his shadow and predict the length of winter - animals have been employed as oracles throughout the World Cup this year with mixed results. According to Reuters, a white goat from Samar, a cat named Achilles from St. Petersburg, a lemur, two hippos, a tapir named Cleopatra, and “Sochi’s Harry the otter, who ... wrongly predicted Spain would beat Russia,” have all been consulted by ravenous soccer fans hungry for news of their team’s fate in the World Cup.

Turning to animals for prognostication is as old as civilization. Ancients studied entrails and watched the flight of birds looking for signs of the future from the gods; and from God, for ancient Israelites also used such tactics to discern the future. In the Wolfgang Petersen film *Troy*, based on Homer’s epic *The Iliad*, nervous Trojans huddled inside their walled city with the Achaean army arrayed outside. The Trojans took solace in some farmers who testified to seeing an eagle clutching a serpent in its talons - a sign from the god Apollo, the priests said, that victory was at hand. The hero of Troy, Hector, was skeptical, and rolled his eyes at this news. The prolonged Trojan war, the Trojan horse, and the eventual sack of Troy proved that eagles are no better predictors of the future than Harry the otter from Sochi, or those two dolphins predicting a Russian soccer victory.

Prophecy, especially biblical prophecy, is often associated with predicting the future. The Hebrew prophets are sometimes called “seers” - able to peer into the future and *see* things before they happen. Their prophecies are sometimes called “oracles” in scripture - divine messages, often ambiguous, but believed to hold keys that can unlock the future. There are oracles in the New Testament as well. A prophet named Agabus in the Book of Acts predicted a famine would grip the Roman world. He also predicted that St. Paul would be arrested in Jerusalem. The Book of Revelation is commonly thought to contain oracles of future doom. And Jesus himself is depicted in places in the gospels as a seer. Christian history is scarred with examples of individuals and churches who’ve tried to collate the Bible’s scattered prophecies to unlock and decipher the mysteries of the future, especially trying to nail down the exact date of the Second Coming of Christ. One recent example was that of Harold Camping, who *The New York Times* called a “biblical soothsayer” and a “dogged forcaster of the end of the world.”<sup>2</sup> That *Times* piece was accompanied by a picture of a billboard funded by Camping’s followers - one of over 5,000 such billboards around the country - with the words, “Judgment Day: May 21, 2011,” and a yellow seal that read, “The Bible guarantees it.” The world didn’t end on May 21, 2011, and there are many tragic

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-soccer-worldcup-rus-cro-dolphins/dolphins-predict-russia-win-over-croatia-in-world-cup-idUSKBN1JV24E>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/18/us/harold-camping-radio-entrepreneur-who-predicted-worlds-end-dies-at-92.html>

stories of devoted Camping followers who gave away their possessions, quit their jobs, threw end-times parties, and then were horror stricken when the sun rose on May 22nd. A recent piece in the *Washington Post* pointed out that half of evangelicals in the U.S. support Israel because they believe events there fulfill ancient biblical prophecies about the end-times, and especially help to set the stage for Christ's Second Coming,<sup>3</sup> which is to treat the Bible as if it were one of the Quatrains of sixteenth century writer Nostradamus. His 942 Quatrains are thought by some to predict everything from the Great Fire of London to the French Revolution to the rise of Hitler, though his followers have never agreed on *what* Nostradamus predicted, and modern scholars have shown that some of his Quatrains were edited after the fact to make them look like prophecies of historical events.

Yes, there are many cross-cultural examples of the human urge to predict the future - the desire to map out and secure what is to come: looking for omens from the flight of birds or reading entrails or heeding oracles or employing dolphins in swimming pools to predict World Cup victories.

But prediction is only one kind of prophecy. There are others. Others that are more potent - and I think more interesting and relevant - than predicting the future. Sociologist Max Weber once said a prophet is simply someone who possesses great charisma and proclaims religious teaching.<sup>4</sup> Weber's is a fairly broad definition that accounts for the fact that most of what prophets in history have said and done has nothing to do with prediction. Take for example the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel. We heard a bit from ch. 2 of his forty-eight chapter prophecy a moment ago. The Book of Ezekiel is a relentless and scathing screed against ancient Israel, filled with oracles of doom, and sermons and songs of judgment, much of it *not* predictions about a distant future, but words addressing the Israel of Ezekiel's day, calling the nation to change course lest disaster strike them. Ezekiel is tough to read. Just in the snippet we heard, the people Ezekiel is sent to are denounced as "rebellious," "impudent and stubborn," and called "briers and thorns" and "scorpions." Ezekiel will go on to use far worse - and even downright abusive - epithets for the people in his book, but almost all of his verbal barbs are meant to warn and chasten the people - meant to make them better people. In one place, Ezekiel pinpoints economic inequality as the sin of sins: you're like the cursed city of Sodom, says Ezekiel, some of you live in "prosperous ease" and don't care about "the poor and needy." This too is prophecy. It's not a prediction; it's an indictment - a moral accusation, a warning, and also a challenge - challenging the people to be better, an appeal to live according to the "better angels" of their nature, as Abraham Lincoln once called it.

But Ezekiel didn't just prophesy with words or songs or sermons; he also engaged in what can only be called street theatre. Like many of the Hebrew prophets, Ezekiel was an odd duck - an outcast, who spoke and acted in provocative, antisocial ways. I can imagine him being laughed at when he built a model of the city of Jerusalem, placed it in the city street, knelt down in front of it, and began to accuse it of moral failing. Passersby probably thought he was nuts. Or, the time when he took out a razor on the sidewalk, shaved his head and beard, and divided the hair into thirds: a third to be burned, a third to be tossed into the wind, and a third to be cut up further with a sword. The dishonor of shaving his head and beard, and destroying the hair, was a street theatre display of what exile would be like for the people if they didn't change their ways. Or, the time Ezekiel packed his bags as if going on a long

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/05/14/half-of-evangelicals-support-israel-because-they-believe-it-is-important-for-fulfilling-end-times-prophecy/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.710d8c856ff4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/05/14/half-of-evangelicals-support-israel-because-they-believe-it-is-important-for-fulfilling-end-times-prophecy/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.710d8c856ff4)

<sup>4</sup> This is from his *Sociology of Religion*. The relevant section is here: <http://www.kkswami.com/texts/vows/reference/prophet.php>

trip, and then dug through the wall of his house, lugging the bags through the hole to show the people what it would be like to flee from foreign armies, again, if they didn't change their ways. These aren't predictions as much as they are warnings - provocative street theatre actions to make the moral point that things need to change. There are street theatre stories elsewhere in the Hebrew prophets: Jeremiah carried the yoke of an ox on his neck to symbolize exile; Isaiah protested naked and barefoot in front of the king's palace to symbolize the shame of corruption; Daniel made his moral point by sitting for a night in a lion's den; Jesus toppled the tables of money-changers in the temple. The list goes on. All of them were persecuted for their passionate displays. Which is why Jesus says in today's gospel reading from Mark that prophets are honored everywhere except in their hometowns where they engage in street theatre, and say things people don't want to hear. Their mission is not so much to predict the future - like dolphins in pools or soothsayers or oracles - but to make the point that some of the most powerful divine messages can arrive in the unlikeliest of ways; that the words of the prophets can sometimes be written on subway walls and tenement halls, as Simon and Garfunkel once sang.

Consider some recent examples of modern-day prophets. There's the example of Father Michael Pflieger, who led an anti-gun violence march north on Chicago's Dan Ryan expressway yesterday. The march shut the expressway down.<sup>5</sup>

Or consider the prophet, Therese Patricia Okoumou, who climbed the Statue of Liberty on July 4th, wearing pink sneakers, to protest the separation of families at the border. A deliberately provocative act, given that the Statue has stood in New York harbor since 1886, welcoming, as the Emma Lazarus poem says, "your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."<sup>6</sup>

Or, consider the prophetic action of Christ Church Cathedral in Indianapolis, who took the holy family from their Nativity scene, put them on the front lawn of the church, and enclosed them in a chain link fence. They "detained" Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus to protest family separations at the border, because Jesus himself was once a refugee and immigrant. Rev. Steve Carlsen defended the church's prophetic act, saying, "What's controversial [is not that we detained the holy family, but] that we're turning away from the values that should be guiding us [as a nation]. The point of a religious icon is to move our hearts," he said. "If at first, people are upset by it, that might just be God trying to move their hearts."<sup>7</sup>

Or, consider the prophetic words of Nelson Mandela. His "prison letters" - hundreds of them, written over twenty-seven years while he was in prison - will be published on July 18th, what would be his 100th birthday. *The New York Times* published excerpts this week.<sup>8</sup> In those letters, Mandela the prophet writes, "Remember that hope is a powerful weapon even when all else is lost." He writes of scripture passages that give him comfort - passages that, in his words, "visualize a new world where there will be no wars, where famine, disease and racial intolerance will be no more, precisely the world for which I am fighting ... ." And he writes fondly of prophet Jesus, who, he says, was a "perfect pest" who "stir[red] up trouble." And Mandela summarizes the movement to end Apartheid in this way, "Our cause is just. It is a

<sup>5</sup> <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/dan-ryan-shutdown-pflieger-march-violence/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-new-york-statue/woman-plucked-from-perch-under-lady-libertys-foot-ending-standoff-idUSKBN1JU2S0>

<sup>7</sup> <http://thehill.com/latino/395326-indianapolis-church-places-mary-joseph-baby-jesus-inside-cage-to-protest-trump>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/06/opinion/sunday/nelson-mandela-unpublished-prison-letters-excerpts.html?smid=tw-nytopinion&smtype=cur>

fight for human dignity and for an honorable life.” And finally these words of wisdom: “Never forget that a saint is a sinner who keeps on trying. ... No ax is sharp enough to cut the soul of a sinner who keeps on trying, one armed with the hope that he will rise and win in the end.”

Prophets speak to us from subway walls and tenement halls and church lawns and prison letters and provocative, street-theatre-type acts in pink sneakers on Lady Liberty. They’re Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr.’ and the Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Harvey Milk and William Barber, who’s leading the Poor People’s Campaign. Prophets speak to us in #metoo movements, and through songs, like Dylan’s *Masters of War* or U2’s *Bloody Sunday*, or in works of art, like Picasso’s anti-war masterpiece, *Guernica*. They speak with signs at demonstrations, banging drums, holding candles; and we know they’re from God when they bless peacemakers with their words and songs and actions. And we know they’re from God when they insist on treating every person with the grace befitting a child of God; anything else - anything less - is what the Bible calls “false prophecy.”

...Let me close with one final example of a modern-day prophetic act. It’s that of a Christian group from the Philippines, who marched in a Pride parade on June 30th.<sup>9</sup> “Members of the Church of Freedom in Christ Ministries ... carried placards and banners that offered an apology for the way some Christians have hurt LGBTQ people through their actions and words over the years. One banner read, ‘Jesus didn’t turn people away. Neither do we.’ Another declared, ‘I’m sorry I’ve rejected and hurt your family in the name of family values.’ ...” It’s called the “‘I’m Sorry’ campaign.” One church member confessed, “‘I used to believe that God condemns [people who are different from me], but when I studied the scriptures, especially the ones that we call “clobber scriptures” that are being cherry-picked from the Bible to condemn ... people, I realized that there’s a lot to discover, including the truth that God is not against anyone.’”

...Words from a prophet. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/christian-group-pride-lgbtq\\_us\\_5b3a371ee4b08c3a8f6c7aba](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/christian-group-pride-lgbtq_us_5b3a371ee4b08c3a8f6c7aba)