

THE GIFT OF PROPHECY

Sermon given by Dan Phillips
At Caroline Valley Community Church
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1ST Sunday of Advent 2010
Isaiah 9:2-7

Once again we come round to the season of Advent. It is the first season of the liturgical year, and a time most of us identify with very strongly. Last year, when we discussed Advent, we noted the three meanings the word has for us as Christians.

First, it was the time when the Jewish faithful awaited the coming of the Messiah. We remember Micah predicting that Christ would be born in Bethlehem and Isaiah speaking of the Messiah as the 'Prince of Peace'. We also hear of Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna, all faithful Jews, waiting for the Messiah, and recognizing Jesus as that Messiah shortly after His birth. This is usually how we think of the season of Advent.

However, a second important meaning of the word for us as Christians is as a reference to the 'Second Coming' of Jesus. We live as Christians in the hope and expectation of the return of Jesus to set things right in our world. Despite the ignorance and foolishness surrounding it, the 'Second Coming' remains a vital part of our Christian experience. And we need to look at the Christmas season in light of the coming of Christ to earth again!

A third meaning of Advent for us as Christians is the experience of Christ entering our lives. As Christians, we live in the knowledge that Jesus is now part of us, and we welcome His influence in our daily routine. We actively look for those places where He shows Himself to be working in us. We watch for opportunities to introduce Jesus to those who don't know Him. We listen for the still, small voice of the Spirit telling us what we should do. This too is a meaning of Advent, and as we travel through this Christmas season, we must consider Advent from all three perspectives: past, present, and future.

This season, we have taken Isaiah 9:6 as the key verse for our Advent sermons. This verse talks about what we have been given by God, and each of the Advent

Sundays this year we will focus on one of the gifts that God has given us. For today, that gift is the gift of prophesy.

To correctly understand this gift, we must know what prophesy is, and was during the time of Jesus. It was the public proclaiming of God's word. It may, or may NOT, have had an element of predicting the future. It was NEVER simply foretelling events. It was often accompanied by dramatic actions and images. And it was usually a challenge to the political and religious authorities of the time.

I want us to look at two distinct ways that we have been given the gift of prophesy. First, we are the recipients of prophecies. The entire Bible is composed of the Word of God. We have that Word to help us in our daily lives. It tells us what God thinks of us and of this world, and what God has done to redeem us and this world. Some passages even tell us what will happen in our future, particularly concerning the return of Jesus Christ.

As the receivers of this book of prophesy, the Bible, we are challenged to believe it and to apply it. This involves accepting the Christ that is presented and allowing him to change our lives into what they should be. This involves modeling our lives and actions on the model that Christ preached and practiced. We should be willing to sacrifice our time and resources to do God's work. We should practice a concern for the poor and marginalized people of our world just as Jesus did. We should proclaim the Word faithfully until our death, just as Jesus did.

But there is another sense of this phrase "the gift of prophesy". This is the sense in which we have been given the prophetic gift. We can be prophets just like the ones mentioned in the Old Testament. We too can proclaim the Word of God just as they did.

What would this be like for us? Well, we talked a few weeks ago about the fact that we as Christians have all been given gifts. These gifts, or abilities all come from the working of the Holy Spirit within us as believers. Paul says in I Corinthians that these gifts are all for the purpose of building up the Christian community, the church. They are not given so we can be famous, or rich, or proud of ourselves. Rather, they are given so we can make the congregation stronger, more capable. And one of these gifts is the gift of prophesy, of proclaiming the Word.

Now, most of us automatically think that this relates to preaching. And it does relate, but it is not limited just to preaching. We can, and do, share our faith in many other ways. As the old adage says “Witness always; use words when necessary.” This saying captures the fact that witnessing is not just speaking. Witnessing is the sum total of our impact on the world around us. It is how we act towards each other. It is how easily we get angry. It is how greedy we are. It is how generous we are with others. It is how much energy we bring to the work we do. It is all these things: they are all a part of our proclaiming the Word.

At this Christmas time, it is about how we observe the season. Do we focus on decorations and parties? Do we focus on family and travel? Do we focus on getting everything done so we don't miss anybody? Do we make it a time of spiritual renewal and awakening? What things does Christmas mean to us? And how we answer that question is a part of our witness, our proclaiming the Word.

Beyond this, we are challenged by the example of the Old Testament prophets to find ways to speak that reach the people we are speaking to. We are called to use some creativity, some drama in our presentation of the Gospel. Think about the imagery that the prophets used! Jeremiah spoke of the words of God burning his mouth. Amos spoke of the plumb line being used to see if the people were straight or crooked. And he spoke of the basket of summer fruit that was rotten because the people were rotten. Hosea likened Israel to an unfaithful wife. All of this imagination, and more, was used creatively to present God's message.

Where is our imagination, where is our creativity when presenting God's message to our world? When do we exercise our minds and hearts to find new and dramatic means of telling people what we are supposed to be passionate about: the Good News? This is our challenge today.

Now, some of you will say that your gift is not that of prophesy. And you may be right. BUT, you need to be careful that you are not burying your talent. You must try first to see what your gift is. If indeed it is not the gift of prophesy, then okay. But first you must try. Maybe you will find that you have already gotten a gift for this season that you have not unwrapped!

e have in the Bible passages that proclaim the word o They told the Jews that Jesus was coming, and they tell us