



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Sermon preached by Rev. Sharon Gracen

September 19, 2010

## The Idea of God

We are in for several weeks of the fiery voice of the prophets. They are a part of a tradition that dates back over three thousand years. We have the image of the angry prophet lifting railing in the town square for the people of his day to repent for the end is near. Amos is one of the best – he thundered with the voice of urgent poetry – “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” My favorite bit of scripture is from one of Amos’ contemporaries, Micah who said “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.” In those two passages, you hear the gist of the message of the prophets.

Prophets are the ones who violate the good dinner guest rule and mix religion and politics. They make everyone uncomfortable but every year around this time, we invite them into our midst through our lectionary readings. Now we can treat them like the relative we put up with at the holidays only because we have to or we can ask ourselves, who are they and what are they telling us and should we pay attention to them?

Rabbi Abraham Heschel provided the definitive work on the subject, aptly called *The Prophets*. His introduction of these voices of alarm includes this; “Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysteria. We ourselves witness continually acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, outrage, misery, but we rarely grow indignant or overly excited. To the prophets even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions.”

To help us understand this outrage, Heschel explains that the prophets are sensitive to the world in a way that most of us are not; they have a heightened awareness of suffering. Did you every have a bad sunburn? The lightest touch of clothing or even a breeze can be agony. That’s what it’s like for the prophet in every moment. Their ears are tuned to a higher frequency than ours; the voice of those who suffer is a constant, loud, painful roar. The only thing that will quiet it is justice and until that comes, the prophet is compelled to try and make us care.

It is the prophet’s relationship with God, often through some experience, like Isaiah’s vision of being taken up to the throne of God and answering the “whom shall I send?” call, with his own “Here I am, Lord, send me.” It is this that opens the channel so that the prophet feels what God feels and is compelled to speak it.

The true prophets of God are more than messengers, they are witnesses, partners with the divine mind and heart. When God is angry, the prophet roars, when God grieves, the prophet consoles.

There was a modern prophet in rural Georgia in the forties. His name was Clarence Jordan and he was an amazing man. He was a farmer and a brilliant scholar of biblical languages. He founded Koinonia Farms, *Koinonia* is a Greek word that means communion or fellowship. The farm in Americus, Georgia was an interracial, Christian, farming community. Even when the community was attacked repeatedly in the sixties and investigated as communist,

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Jordan maintained his commitment to living as if God's kingdom had already come. It was from this community that Habitat for Humanity was created.

I believe that Jordan's ear was attuned to God's desire for us and he left us an amazing gift. He wrote the *Cotton Patch Gospels* a translation of the Gospels into the vernacular of Georgia during the Civil Rights Era. They are a little dated now but still marvelously wrought with the town of Valdosta as Nazareth and Atlanta as Jerusalem, Washington as Rome, Pontius Pilate as the sheriff and Herod as the governor of Georgia. Clarence Jordan's brilliance as a translator is best seen in his opening to the Gospel of John. The Greek word *logos* has confounded translators, we usually hear it as *the word*. "In the beginning was the word..." But Jordan gave us "In the beginning was the Idea and the Idea was with God and the Idea was God." Jesus is the embodiment, the Incarnation, of God's original idea of creation. That idea is love and the balance that holds all things together in the universe. Justice is the balance between power and weakness, abundance and scarcity, love of self and love of others. That idea of God is what the prophet sees and feels and knows. The prophet looks around and sees a world out of balance and can do nothing less than call us to care enough to insist on a better, more just world.

Jesus as the Idea of God is the ultimate prophet revealing the heart and mind of God and inviting us all into communion with the Idea, God's kingdom of balance, justice, and love. From the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, he talked about the Kingdom of God to expose the injustice of the kingdoms of the world. This is the Jesus that can make us uncomfortable, like the other prophets, for it is difficult to ignore the political implications.

Marcus Borg lays this out in his book *Jesus*. Here's an important paragraph;

"The Bible is both personal and political. I did not always see it this way. I grew up in a church that saw little connection between Christianity and politics. They were two different realms, one belonging to God and the other to Caesar. The notion that there could be a conflict between the two was quite foreign. But over the decades of my adult life, the perception that the Bible is political as well as personal has deepened into a conviction.

The Bible is political. It is about God's passion for a different kind of world – one in which people have enough, not as the result of charity but as the fruit of justice, and in which nations do not war against one another anymore."

All I have for you now is questions;

"What do we do with this part of our faith?" Ignore it or approach it with caution?

"Is it the role or responsibility of the church to be a prophet in the community?"

"Can we or should we, or how would we have a conversation here about our faith and our politics?" One of the best things about the Anglican tradition should be our ability to have respectful dialogue about prickly subjects, recognizing that we might find less of the black and white kind of answers and perhaps arrive at conclusions that embrace all points of view, less an *either/or* approach and more of a *both/and*.

I ask these questions because I truly do want to hear your answers. I will never tell you what to think but I will challenge you to think. What I will do is to put information and questions before you. I believe that wrestling with the big questions will enliven our life together as a community of faith, those who believe in and below God.