

“Prophets unheard”
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Several weeks ago, the king of the Netherlands, King Willem-Alexander, told a reporter that he’s been secretly piloting passenger airplanes for 21 years. For 21 years, his voice boomed over the jet’s PA system, saying welcome aboard, and no one had a clue they were hearing the voice of their king.

It’s amazing what we can fail to hear.

Pentecost is that story. A story about what gets heard and not heard, *who* gets heard and not heard.

On that Pentecost day, an international crowd has gathered in Jerusalem for a Jewish harvest festival known as the Feast of Weeks. It is a time when the Hebrew people remember their former slavery in Egypt and God’s insistence that they be free. It is a time when they remember God setting up a community and laying down a law to guide that community. It is a time when no one is a servant, no one a slave; this day is for everyone.

On this day, the disciples have gathered. Jesus’ mother, Mary, is there, fresh from seeing her baby boy lynched on a cross and then risen up. Jesus’ brothers, his disciples, everybody’s there. All of them, witnesses to centuries of trauma, to just one bad thing after another happening to God’s alleged people. They are witnesses to the state-enforced violence of the crucifixion. They are also witnesses to the One who refuses to bend a knee to violence, who insists on life and freedom and the triumph of love, who creates sanctuary from death and sin. His name is Emmanuel, Jesus, the Christ, Messiah, Savior, a Jewish boy whom death couldn’t keep down and rose up a God.

The Holy Spirit is on these disciples. She has given them the power to speak a story capable of changing the world. And speak they do.

They declare words that make the crowd tremble, that astonish, perplex, and astound, that rile and agitate. They are the words of our youth and their visions, of our elders and their dreams. They are the words of slaves, of the oppressed.

They are Spirit words. The same Spirit words that inspired Mary to speak of a world overturned (Luke 1:46-55). The same Spirit words that inspired Zechariah to speak of a dawn that gives light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death (Luke 1:67-79). The same Spirit words that inspired Jesus to declare that he is here “to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners, and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

Every member of that crowd in Jerusalem hears these words. Everyone hears the apostles speaking in their own native language. But they're so caught up in their surprise at how "articulate" these supposedly backwater, uneducated Galileans are, they do not hear the meaning of the words. They don't know they're hearing the words of prophets. Of God.

Some even say the apostles must be drunk on wine. These critics—these guardians of the status quo—trivialize and criticize the prophet words they are not hearing.

We are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as the apostles. But let us imagine for a moment that we are the crowd. We are the ones who need to *hear* a story.

If we are the crowd, then who are the prophets?

The prophets of today are the ones who have witnessed the power of death and the even greater power of resurrection. They are the ones who invite us to believe in a different kind of world—a world that belongs to the Lord—and to commit our lives to its realization.

They are the children of Syria staring into cameras. They are the mothers of black men slain and locked up. They are the poets recording violence and hope in rhyme. They are the families gathered at the border, pressing in. They are the prophets of soup kitchens and homeless shelters. They are the children drinking in the sludge of coal mining and spitting out cancer. They are the men pressed to the ground, dying, shouting, "I can't breathe." They are the women who refuse to make their bodies the playthings for male rage. They are the boys kissing boys, girls holding girls' hands. They are the Indigenous peoples blocking a pipeline at Standing Rock.

They are the ones who blow—blow down these church walls and spread its sanctuary all over this city, this nation, this world. They are the ones who show us a better God, whose tongues unravel privilege and oppression, whose hearts ache with love, whose angel hands wrap around the vulnerable, whose ears hear the Spirit rhapsodizing freedom, whose veins pump life into our dead hearts.

Are we listening to the voices that are prophesying from beneath our modern crosses? Are we, like some members of that crowd in Jerusalem, asking, "What does this mean? Tell me more." Or, are we sneering and dismissing what we hear—or rather, do not hear?

If we're arguing with Black Lives Matter, with the cry to aid Syrian refugees, with the appeal for love from the LGBTQ community, with the plight of modern-day slaves trafficked for labor and sex, with the communities reshaped into ghettos of environmental waste... if we're arguing, we're not hearing it. If we're saying, "Yes, but..." we're not hearing it.

There will be a time to talk about the statistics of crucifixion, to hear the perspective of the Roman centurion, to debate the complexities of the issues and their solutions. There will be a time. But right now is the time for a prophet to be heard. Right now is the time to be saying, "Tell me more."

Pentecost is what happens when the victims of violence stand up, and God speaks through them.

And on that first Pentecost, some of the crowd listens. Some are converted. Some catch the vision. They join this newly radical and inclusive community. They share their goods in common, caring for each according to their need. Luke describes this early community as being occupied by awe. They worship and break bread together, eating with “glad and generous hearts.” They heal the wounded. They cause signs and wonders.

The good news then, and the good news today, is that nothing’s going to stop God’s prophesying. The resistance of the crowd didn’t stop Peter from preaching about the “the ways of life” through Christ. And it’s not going to stop today’s prophets either.

Poet Danez Smith writes, “Again and again, we are called to the pulpit of poetry to eulogize and galvanize, to pen sermon after sermon, poem after poem about the murder of our people at the hands of police and vigilantes, at our hands, at their own hands... I want to un-tinge black joy, to remove what haunts the corners of our happiness.”

He goes on:

“Dear lord, I have looked at the children at the park outside my bedroom window, stumpy and fast and sweaty and glistening like onyx in the sun, and I don’t have the strength to tell them about their skin. How long must we tell our children what waits to imprison and end them simply because they are our children? How long can a black child survive being a child? Sweet lord, I want our heaven now! I want what too many have dreamed of while heading to that long sleep. I want to no longer be called to the pulpit to deliver the eulogy, to ready the congregation for what comes at us with fire and bullet and legislation. I want to stand and say, ‘Ain’t God Good?’ and not waver in my own response. How? It’s a spell I’m not sure poetry is big enough to handle. Reader, won’t you dream with me? Won’t you help make this world our poem? Won’t you build with me a room big enough for joy, where what seeks to end us isn’t simply not invited but instead ceases to exist? Do you have the tools? Do you know the tools we have yet to invent?”

Before we help Danez build this world, we’ve got to hear his words first, hear all them Pentecost words coming out of the rooms full of crosses. We’ve got to listen hard. Such that the prophets of today do not become the unheard prophets of yesterday.

So tell me: what do you hear? **Amen.**