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Fourth Sunday After Epiphany, January 31, 2010
Jer. 1:4-10; Ps. 71:1-6; 1 Cor. 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

Good Shepherd Berkeley

PROPHECY AND LOVE

There are many ways for God to become manifest in our world. And the Sundays after Epiphany are a time when we get to explore some of them. Today's readings from Jeremiah and Luke put the spotlight on one in particular: prophecy.

First, we heard the story of how Jeremiah was called to be a prophet. Poor Jeremiah! The Kingdom of Judah was tottering, threatened by enemies on all sides, split by internal factions, ruled by weak, indecisive kings. Its last moment of hope was dashed, early in Jeremiah's career, when King Josiah, its last capable ruler, was killed in a battle with the Pharaoh of Egypt.

Jeremiah could see what was coming. He saw the nation's leadership running in circles in search of ideas and then settling on the worst ones available—because they had lost touch with reality. God told him that his job as prophet was "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow." God does go on to add "to build and to plant." But Jeremiah didn't get to do very much of that. Most of it was about destruction and exile.

He had a miserable life of it, and he complained about it. But he couldn't seem to help himself. It was almost as if the words were forcing their way out of him, even when he tried to be quiet. And, as a result, he suffered a lot at the hands of the various factions in power.

It's no fun being a prophet.

We heard something similar about Jesus as prophet. He warns his listeners that God plays no favorites. We think we're God's people. Yes, good. But God may choose, instead of us, to feed some foreign widow during a famine or cleanse an enemy general of leprosy. God's generosity isn't limited to us.

You remember the results. People were so outraged that they hustled him out of town to throw him off a cliff. But, like Jeremiah, he somehow survived the experience and went his way.

What do we learn from these two stories? One thing, obviously, is to be grateful if God *doesn't* dragoon us into being prophets. Still, let's face it, we have had a bit of history of this sort of thing at Good Shepherd. We were out on the edge back in the Civil

Rights era. We pushed the boundaries in the time of Women's Liberation. We made a case to Bishop Swing for full participation by gay and lesbian people when he really wanted the whole issue just to go away.

But another thing we might notice is that prophecy isn't always the most *effective* mode of explicating God to God's people. It tends to go against the grain and tell us things we don't want to hear and make us angry.

It's still terribly important. Prophets explain what God is doing in the world and something of what God wants to accomplish. If nothing else, they leave us with enough information that sometime later on, after we've made a mess of things and suffered the consequences, we can at least look back and say, "Oh yeah, they told us so, didn't they?"

Or, maybe it's not always quite that bad. Sometimes, the faithful do in fact respond to prophecy and try to draw closer to God's will. And then we look back and realize that those people who seemed so annoying at the beginning were onto something. They've helped us move in the right direction after all.

I think the Episcopal Church, as a whole, is in one of those blessed moments with regard some of the prophets of the last century. We aren't free of racism, but we are so far from where we were fifty years ago. And we can look back on prophets like Martin Luther King, Jr., and William Stringfellow, to name only two, and see that God really was revealing something of Godself through them in their prophecy.

We aren't free of sexism, either, but we can look at Katharine Jefferts Schori, doing a superb job as our Presiding Bishop, and see that we have made real strides in appreciating and accepting God's gifts through women in ministry. We can look back to the women who pushed hard, against a lot of resistance, to get the church to face that issue and be grateful for them.

And we aren't free of heterosexism. Rightly or wrongly, that's still the ongoing question for the Episcopal Church right now. But we have at least heard the prophets and we have started to move and continue to move.

Good Shepherd has played a part. This community listened when God called and spoke up in all of these areas. Perhaps we have a continuing prophetic vocation. God may yet have more to reveal of Godself through us. If so, I'm guessing we will do our best to respond to that call.

But I also want to say that it's not the only way God reveals Godself. It's not helpful to forget that. There's more to God's revelation and more to Christian life.

One of our other readings today points a different direction. We had that famous chapter about love from the First Letter to the Corinthians. Even if you don't much like Paul, you can probably say something good for that passage.

And there, Paul actually says that there's something much more important than prophecy. Prophecy, without love, is worth nothing. Prophecy will actually come to an end, difficult as that may be to imagine.

But there are things deeper and more enduring, things that embody even more of God's self-revelation: faith and hope and love.

Of these three, the greatest is love. You may remember that another NT writer put it even more strongly: "God is love." (1 John 4:8, 16)

Paul is saying here that love is vital to the life of the church. There are other manifestations of Christian life that will wax and wane, come and go, but this one has to remain or we are no longer really hearing and responding to the gospel of God's grace.

Love is the lifeblood of Christian communities. Prophecy may come or go, but love is what allows a community like ours to live and breathe and go on living.

What does that actually mean for us? How do we live out this love of sisters and brothers?

It doesn't mean that we're necessarily each other's best friends. For the introverts among us, at least, that would be more best friends than we can really handle. But it does mean that we take each other seriously enough to care about what people are going through, to be helpful when we can, to cut each other a little slack when our imperfections are showing, to remember that God loves everyone here—that this place is awash in God's love, even when we're not aware of it.

And God's love, of course, doesn't draw a line at the door. Over the years, this congregation has found ways to share the love both with one another and with people beyond our group who need it.

We don't all do it in the same ways. As Paul reminded us last week in that reading about the church as the Body of Christ, we don't all have exactly the same gifts or the same callings. Even a small community like ours requires a lot of different gifts to make it alive. But together we live out the love of God and give thanks for what everybody contributes to it.

In doing that we can become a revelation of God ourselves, the body of Christ in which God is incarnate as love.

I don't mean to set prophecy aside. But when God has things for us to do in that line, God will let us know. For the immediate future, maybe love is the most important manifestation of God for us to cultivate. How does each of us share our gifts with the community as a whole? How do we as a congregation share our gifts with other people in our emerging area ministry? How do we keep our hands and hearts open to the needy world around us?

Today is the day of our Annual Meeting, and I'm very conscious of how much gratitude I feel to the various (and varied) people in this community for the love and care that they have exercised in, with, for, out of Good Shepherd Episcopal Church. It's been a demanding year for this congregation, and the fact that the rest of the world seems to have decided to crash and burn around us hasn't helped. But even with all that, I feel right now that we are rich, enriched by the gifts of so many; and we have been sharing some of our gifts with others. That, I believe, is the thing to focus on as we bid farewell to Ann, as we take stock at the beginning of the new year, and as we take our next steps together with one another and with Este Cantor, our new priest-in-charge.

God has given us very good gifts in one another. I hope you can say "Amen" to that.