

Prophetic Imagination

3rd Sunday of Advent (Year A)

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For some world leaders, everything has to be only one way, their way. They only see things from their perspective, from their needs, and from their insecurities. Anything outside of their vision is not only wrong, but unthinkable. As a result, they lack imagination, creativity, and the ability to dream of a different future. To be honest, I think all of us in some way fall into this trap ourselves.

In our readings this weekend, we hear the contrast between what people stuck in their own ways see and what people who are open to the new see. From our first reading from Isaiah, people stuck in their own ways see the desert, the parched land, and the steppe. They see frightened people. They see the deaf, the lame, and the mute as helpless. For those open to the new and who have a little patience, to use the lesson from the second reading from the book of James, they see so much more than what is. They can also see what could be. They see the desert and parched land exulting, they see the steppe rejoicing and blooming. They see strong people with their eyes opened, the lame leaping, and the mute singing. Both sets of people are looking at the exact same thing, but they see things much differently. One set sees nothing special; the other sees abundance and potential.

In our Gospel today, Jesus asks a question about how we see things. He asks the crowds three times, 'what did you go out to see?' He wants to know if they went out into the desert to see their old ways, such as a reed in the wind, a king dressed in fine clothing, or a prophet, or if they went out to see something new. 'Then, what did you go out to see?'

In 1978, the theologian and Old Testament scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann, made the expression 'prophetic imagination' popular through his book with the same title. In it, he wrote, "it is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one." (40) Prophetic imagination is a ministry we need in our world today. As our modern-day kings in the Church and world try to resign us to fate, their fate, we need people among us who are open to something new. We need prophets who can take us beyond black and white thinking, either/or options, and my way or the highway attitudes. We need prophets who can see alternative solutions and a variety of ways forward. We need prophets who can remind us that not all is lost and that we can rejoice even in the middle of sadness or setbacks. We need prophets who speak in the name of the Lord.

The Third Sunday of Advent invites us to go out and see something new wherever we are used to only seeing one way of doing things.

How do I get stuck in my ways without realizing there are other ways of living, being, and acting? Who do I know that has this ministry of imagination?

As we continue with this mass, let us hear Jesus ask each of us over and over again, 'then what are you going out to see?' If we are going out to be confirmed in our own biases, to follow the kings of this world, or to remain set in our ways, we will be going down a dead end. But if we are going out to meet the prophet and yes, the one even greater than a prophet, we are going to see the world in a whole new way and probably like it so much better.