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**PROPHETIC LEADERSHIP:  
ENGAGEMENT IN COUNTER-IMAGINATION**  
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**Abstract:** It is a given that the “prophetic” belongs centrally to pastoral leadership. What we may mean by “prophetic ministry,” however, is much disputed and far from clear. More conservative folk surely have it wrong that the “prophetic” is constituted by prediction in the sense that the Old Testament prophets “predicted” Christ. It is clear that the prophets were deeply engaged in their own time and place and had no interest in such long-term possibilities.

It is equally clear, this paper will contend, that the progressives err in their assumption that prophetic ministry means advocacy for social justice about specific issues, an advocacy that is often taken to be a convergence of authoritarian certitude, anger, righteous indignation, and scolding advice. I have no doubt that advocacy for social justice is important, but I resist the notion that such advocacy can be properly labeled “prophetic.” Thus I will begin with a different notion of “prophetic ministry.”

### **The Poetry of Prophecy**

It is of enormous importance that the prophets of the Old Testament characteristically spoke in poetic language. By that I do not mean they created rhymes. Rather they spoke in elusive, metaphorical ways as a rhetorical strategy for escaping and challenging the powerful ideologies that had reduced social reality to control and social possibility to the capability of the dominant regime.

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In the Old Testament that dominant ideology was characteristically a) the claim of the *Jerusalem establishment* concerning king and temple, or b) the *imperial context* in which the dislocated of Israel had to live under a hegemony without king or temple. Clearly these two contexts fostered very different ideologies, but they were agreed on settled social possibility. The Jerusalem ideology was total and allowed no claim outside of its own; and clearly imperial hegemony (Babylon, Persia) tolerated no alternative that would subvert or challenge imperial control.

The Jerusalem ideology that dominated until the destruction of the city in 587 BCE traded on the notion of being chosen, a chosen royal family and a chosen sanctuary of divine presence:

He chose the tribe of Judah,  
 Mount Zion, which he loves.  
 He built his sanctuary like the high heavens,  
     like the earth, which he has founded forever.  
 He chose his servant David...  
     to be shepherd of his people Jacob,  
     of Israel, his inheritance (Psalm 78:68-71).

That ideology of chosenness taught that no serious threat could come against Jerusalem due to such chosenness, a belief that is voiced in the most familiar “Song of Zion,” Psalm 46:

Therefore we will not fear,  
     though the earth should change,  
     though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;  
     though its waters roar and foam,  
     though the mountains tremble with its tumult ....  
 The Lord of hosts is with us;  
     the God of Jacob is our refuge (Psalm 46:2-3, 7).

The result is that the ideology of chosenness protected the elites in Jerusalem from facing social reality. The matter of faith in the exile of the empire was a very different matter. It perforce assumed and accepted imperial hegemony—first Babylon, then Persia, then Hellenistic powers—and believed that faith required accommodation to social reality as defined by empire.

Any “prophetic” declaration that proceeded prosaically on these settled assumptions—Jerusalem or empire—had already been domesticated and rendered innocuous. For that reason the daring poetic rhetoric of the prophets—in the eighth century vis-à-vis Jerusalem ideology, in the sixth century vis-à-vis imperial reality—spoke in a rhetoric that refused to accommodate a settled ideology, nor did it permit itself to be captured by such powerful claims.

If we ask what this long tradition of elusive, poetic utterance intended to accomplish, I propose that it aimed to *reimagine the world as though the character of YHWH were a real and lively and engaged agent in the reality of the world*. The truth is that the Jerusalem establishment had reduced YHWH to a guarantor of chosenness and did not expect or accept that YHWH would or could do otherwise than guarantee. And in belated imperial context, YHWH had been eliminated as an agent, because YHWH was seen to be defeated by imperial gods who were stronger and had prevailed. Thus the prophetic task was to *re-utter* YHWH as a living, decisive agent in a world that largely assumed that YHWH was an irrelevant memory.

### **Prophetic Ministry in Contemporary America**

I do not believe there are easy, obvious, or direct connections from the ancient world of the Bible to our own contemporary world. But I will dare nonetheless, in what follows, to suggest an analogue whereby we may think again about “prophetic ministry” among us. Not unlike the Jerusalem ideology of chosenness or the imperial ideology of hegemony, pastors in U.S. churches live and work amid the American ideology of the National Security State. That ideology, massive in its influence but seldom lined out in a specific way, assumes U.S. exceptionalism, that is, that the United States is a special case in human history that is not subject to the ordinary conventions of life in the world. That exceptionalism assumes that we are, by right, an especially privileged, entitled people, blessed by God in peculiar ways. We are thereby given preeminence in the

world and are entitled to more than our share of the world's goods in order to sustain an unparalleled and unsustainable standard of living. That exceptional privilege permits, requires, and legitimates unparalleled military strength, both in order to control markets and resources around the world, and to propagate the truth of "democratic capitalism" all over the world, including parts of the world that are not amenable to that ideology. The pastoral reality is that this ideology of *privilege sustained by power* is so pervasive that it is the air we breathe and the water in which we swim. It is beyond question or criticism; it renders us incapable of thinking or imagining outside of its definitions of reality.

Now if this characterization of our situation seems an outrageous overstatement, ask any responsible pastor about the list of subjects that cannot be talked about in the congregation. The list will most often include capitalism, individualism, the market, our current wars, and the military budget, all of which are manifestations of the endless expansionism of that ideology. The theological requirement of such an all-encompassing ideology is to trim and tame the God of the Gospel in order to fit the claim. Very many conventional pastors and theological thinkers (most of us some of the time) tend to accommodate YHWH to the needs and claims of that ideology, so that YHWH becomes the patron and legitimator of democratic capitalism and U.S. exceptionalism, just as YHWH vouched for king and temple in ancient Jerusalem. YHWH has thus signed on to our preferred truth and is limited in scope, power, and authority to that definition of reality. Conservatives have managed this by reducing God to a scholastic system in which God is a legitimator. Progressives have handled it differently by dismissing any notion of an "interventionist God," thus conforming God to the requirements of Enlightenment reason and ending with the tacit (or expressed!) judgment that "God has no hands but ours." In such a way, conservatives and progressives collude in reducing YHWH to a helpless

support or an innocuous bystander but without a capacity for free agency. Thus:

- In the ancient world YHWH lost agency by a total commitment to an ideology of chosenness;
- In the ancient world YHWH lost agency by defeat at the hands of the stronger imperial gods;
- In our contemporary world, YHWH has lost agency by complete commitment to the U.S. enterprise of exceptionalism;
- In our contemporary world YHWH has lost agency by conforming to Enlightenment rationality, so that good can only be done by “our hands.”

In the latter case, it is likely that this is the ground for moral urgency (among progressives), because there is no one other than us to work the good of justice. In the world, ancient or contemporary, God has lost agency!

### Reimagining YHWH’s Presence in the World

The Old Testament prophets, by their daring utterances, *reimagine the world*—the world of Jerusalem chosenness or the world of imperial alienation—*as a world in which YHWH is an effective agent. Mutatis mutandis*, I propose that prophetic ministry in contemporary U.S. context is the hard work of reimagining the world—not according to the technological reason of Enlightenment categories—as a sphere in which YHWH as an agent is alive and on the move. This notion of prophetic ministry requires a deliberate epistemological act that violates the reason of most congregations that have long since given up any notion of divine agency. (This act of epistemological violation is one we commit regularly when we dare to say, “Christ is risen,” but we do not often think to commit that same violation in any other context.)

I suggest that this act of imagination that violates conventional epistemology is important

- Because most “prophetic ministry” is constituted by nagging about particular issues without seriously challenging the elemental assumptions of dominant

culture, and such scolding generally has no staying power at all;

- Because it is essential that the underneath assumptions of dominant ideology be named and exposed, for without such naming and exposing no real change can happen;
- Because the work is to be done at the level of elemental imagination and not simply at the level of concrete action; when utterance concerns only concrete issues, the dominant ideology will prevail and remain unchallenged;
- Because the church is the only venue—the only meeting—where the provocative language of agency can be spoken concerning God, a rhetoric that can generate energy for purposeful, subversive action in the world.

Given that framing of “prophetic ministry,” we may reconsider the utterances of the old prophets to see how they conducted themselves and challenged the elemental assumptions of their culture. We may, moreover, consider the problematics and pathologies produced by dominant culture to which the agency of YHWH is a transformative antidote. I will identify two such pathologies and consider the ways in which the prophets, in their elusive utterances, invited the people of God to an alternative perspective.

### **Recognizing the Truth of God’s Role in the World**

An ideology of chosenness produces a *practice of denial* to which the prophetic antidote is *truth-telling*. Such an ideology selects what will be noticed and permits much else to remain hidden. Specifically the Jerusalem ideology imagines that the royal-priestly establishment was immune to all historical threats. With that immunity came the conviction that actions do not produce consequences and, therefore, actions can be taken as one prefers because actions do not matter for the future. Such a posture, of course, eliminates the rule of God and

imagines a guaranteed autonomy:

At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,  
and I will punish the people who rest complacently  
on their dregs, those who say in their hearts,  
“The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm”  
(Zeph. 1:12).

The statement characterizes a people and a culture in which accountability to YHWH has completely disappeared.

Specifically, Jerusalem was able to assume that its foolish international policies could be practiced with impunity and that its oppressive social policies and practice could be enacted without any serious consequences. Chosenness gives a “pass.” Such an imagined immunity could only be taken seriously because YHWH, the guarantor of covenantal accountability, had been eliminated from the equation. In this self-regard, the Jerusalem elites could not conceive any disruption of life that would arise beyond the control of this ideology. They denied the moral seriousness and risk of their own lives.

One typical representative of such denial was the prophet Hananiah, who was an adversary of Jeremiah just as the Babylonian army came against the city. Hananiah was fully ensconced in the Jerusalem ideology as it had been voiced a century earlier by Isaiah. But now, at the end of the seventh century, Jeremiah had announced the dire threat that the city faced and had dared to connect that military threat to Torah disobedience and the responsive action of YHWH. He drew the conclusion that such threat was a form of divine punishment against the city.

But Hananiah, grounded in the ideology of the city, resisted that prophetic judgment. He averred that the Babylonian threat was only a passing episode that did not need to be taken seriously. He opined there would soon be a “return to normalcy”:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel:  
I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon.

Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the Lord, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon" (Jer. 28:2-4).

When Jeremiah resisted such a facile assurance by wearing a yoke to signify coming imperial oppression,

(t)he prophet Hananiah took the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, and broke it (Jer. 28:10).

The narrative judges, in the end, that Hananiah was completely mistaken. He thus is a cipher for the denial of the Jerusalem community. That same denial is marked by Jeremiah among those who give easy assurances in the face of threat:

They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace (Jer. 6:14; see 8:11; Ezek. 13:10).

Reliance upon the conviction of chosenness led to the illusion that nothing bad could happen in Jerusalem. The same illusion is reflected in the characterization of the affluent in the northern capital of Samaria. Amos describes their self-indulgence with an "alas":

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,  
and lounge on their couches  
and eat lambs from the flock,  
and calves from the stall;  
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,  
and like David improvise on instruments of music;  
who drink wine from bowls and  
anoint themselves with the finest oils... (Amos 6:4-6).

The oracle begins with "alas" ("woe") indicating deathly trouble to come; it concludes with the verdict: "They are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph." They do not care or notice the ruin of the society that sustained their self-indulgence. Their ideological position functioned like a narcotic that prevented them from noticing. Then follows

verse 7 that anticipates a consequence that arises from their conduct, the loss of revelry and dislocation. Who but a poet could connect such *self-indulgent consumerism* with *historical dislocation*? But that is what the poets do in order to penetrate the denial of their contemporaries.

One particular practice of denial is the capacity to call things by their wrong names, that is, to falsely label. Thus Isaiah anticipates trouble for those who refuse to call things by their right names:

Ah (woe!) you who call evil good and good evil,  
 who put darkness for light and light for darkness,  
 who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!  
 (Isa. 5:20).

When things are mislabeled, then one need not see them as they are.

A prayer by “Reverend Billy” indicates how the denial of euphemism works among us:

Dear Lord,  
 We can't believe that bombing is called security.  
 We can't believe that monopoly is called democracy.  
 We can't believe that gasoline prices are called  
     foreign policy...  
 We can't believe that racism is called crime fighting!  
 We can't believe that sweatshops are called efficiency!  
 We can't believe that a mall is called the  
     neighborhood! ....  
 We can't believe that advertising is called free speech!  
 We can't believe that love is called for sale!  
 We can't believe that you think there are two  
     political parties!  
 We can't believe that you repeat the word  
     “democracy” like it's a liturgical chant  
     from a lost religion.<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that a society that traffics in violence and exploitation must disguise such policies and practices in order to protect the ideology that gives immunity.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Talen, *What Should I do if Reverend Billy Is in My Store?* (New York: New Press, 2003), 93-94.

It is surely the case that the U.S. church, largely settled into the ideology of U.S. exceptionalism, colludes in denial. Thus we have complete confidence in the “American way of life” that is much confused with the promises of the Gospel. Across the entire political spectrum, we imagine that our way in the world is the right way and are largely incapable of noticing the trouble and suffering evoked in the world by U.S. practices and policies. More than that, we try not to take with seriousness the unraveling of the human fabric in our society because of greed that very often eventuates in violence, even if covert violence. The undercurrents of our society, like those of ancient Jerusalem, might suggest we are very close to an emergency situation, given the failure of our institutions. But even the recent economic distress has not evoked any deep review of our policies and our practices that put our society at risk. Clearly, we are like ancient Jerusalem in our immense capacity for denial.

Given a propensity for denial, the prophets in Jerusalem must find a perspective outside the royal-priestly apparatus from which to speak truth that can expose denial. They find that perspective by appealing to the will and purpose of YHWH, who stands before and behind and outside the Jerusalem apparatus. Thus the prophetic word, albeit a human word, purports to be “the word of the Lord” that surges on the prophet who is compelled and commandeered to speak against the settled truth of the establishment in its illusion (see Amos 3:7; Jer. 20:9). We do not need to imagine that this “transcendent word” is a divine whispering in the ear of the prophet. Rather the prophets are themselves fully situated in the covenantal tradition and completely attuned to the reality of social life around them. That convergence of *tradition* and *context* generates a passionate urgency and intensity that spills over into elusive poetic utterance that intends to shatter the ideological cocoon of their setting. Such poetry, albeit urgent, can be voiced in sadness as well as anger, in pathos as well as shrillness,

but always at an angle, always against the grain of common assumption.

The *truth-telling* that is the prophetic antidote to denial includes a description of the self-destructive failure of society that scholars call *indictment*. Jeremiah, for example, variously calls that failure fickleness, sickness, stupidity, or even a refusal to be embarrassed:

*Fickleness:*

You have played the whore with many lovers....  
By the waysides you have sat waiting for lovers,  
like a nomad in the wilderness.  
You have polluted the land with your whoring and  
wickedness (Jer. 3:1-2).

*Sickness:*

For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,  
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.  
Is there no balm in Gilead?  
Is there no physician there?  
Why then has the health of my poor people  
not been restored (Jer. 8:21-22)?

*Stupidity:*

All of them turn to their own course,  
like a horse lunging headlong into battle.  
Even the stork in the heavens knows its times;  
And the turtledove, swallow, and crane  
observe the time of their coming;  
but my people do not know the ordinances  
of the Lord (Jer. 8:6-7).

*Refusal to be embarrassed:*

They acted shamefully, they committed abomination;  
yet they were not ashamed, they did not know  
how to blush (Jeremiah 6:15).

One notices that in all of this suggestive imagery there is no discussion or even mention of any concrete issue. It is all metaphorical and imaginative, going beneath concrete issues to the rock-bottom reality of having departed a compelling relationship with YHWH.

The prophetic response to denial with the utterance of truth goes on to imagine, in the voice of God, the *inescapable consequences* of fickleness, sickness, stupidity, or

hard-heartedness. In juridical language this is a *sentence*, but in fact it is simply tracing out the God-guaranteed consequences, because the prophets know that in the world governed by YHWH consequences follow. The prophets characteristically trace consequences (punishment!) by an introductory “therefore”:

*Therefore* the showers have been withheld,  
and the spring rain has not come (Jer. 3:3).

*Therefore* thus says the Lord, the God of hosts...  
I am going to bring upon you a nation from far  
away... (Jer. 5:14-15).

*Therefore* I will give their wives to others  
and their fields to conquerors (Jer. 8:10).

*Therefore* they shall fall among those who fall;  
at the time when I punish them, they shall be  
overthrown (Jer. 8:12).

The *therefore* makes it sound like cause and effect. But the poetry need not be taken that way. We need not imagine a crass supernaturalism in order to follow the poetic line that shows how this follows that. What the prophets do make clear is that we live in a seriously accountable world, and YHWH is the one who calls to account.

In our own context where denial is the order of the day, the prophetic ministry of truth-telling exposes the euphemisms that disguise and calls things by their right names. Prophetic faith is propelled by pain, the pain that greed imposes on the vulnerable, the pain that violence propagates on those at risk. It requires a noticing eye and a suffering tongue to call attention to the deep hurt that is inflicted on some by others, by policy, by indifference, by self-assertiveness at the expense of the neighbor, all of which contradict the rule of YHWH.

I suspect that in our time and place the capacity to penetrate the denial, and so to exhibit the failure and the pain generated by a self-sufficient system, is voiced not in anger or indignation. It is rather in sadness and loss. The sadness and loss need not be voiced in confrontational ways. The expression can be quiet and sober and unflinching in its resolve. The point is not to establish

blame. The point, rather, is to make available the reality of hurt and loss, and to trace back the ways in which such hurt and loss are not an accident but are products of an ideological system. In this tradition, moreover, such an articulation that flies in the face of dominant ideology is not simply another opinion. It is rather a sounding of a deep holiness that cuts below our usual management of truth and speaks from a holiness that stands outside of our management. Our predecessors in prophetic office could do no better than to take their deep utterance as the word of God. And we do no better than that, as long as we remember the God who offers such a word is a God who notices and cares, and who knows that more denial will only bring more trouble.

Thus, at their best, I imagine that a Christian congregation and a Christian pastor exist in an ocean of denial. When people come to church, however, by their presence they invite talk about that which cannot be talked about anywhere else. They invite us to speak a holy word that is closely linked to pain. They expect from us a word of reality that is not shaved down to accommodate. And when they hear, such an utterance might permit the unsettling awareness that this is the one place in town where the truth can be and is told. It is said there in spite of our preference for denial. It is truth that cannot finally be resisted. It is told there because such truth invites to fresh decision that we may call repentance. It is truth told there because the truthful word is “like a burning fire shut up in my bones” (Jer. 20:9).<sup>2</sup> The word uttered, albeit with stammering, is that of which YHWH declares:

Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces (Jer. 23:29)?

To be sure, the ideology in which we are all enwrapped seeks to preclude such utterance. But it does burn and

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<sup>2</sup> See my exploration of the theme, Walter Brueggemann, *Like Fire in the Bones: Listening for the Prophetic Word in Jeremiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

sound and hammer. Everything depends upon it! Saying it and hearing it make for freedom.

Promising *Hope in the Midst of Despair* There is a second wave of prophetic practice in the Old Testament, namely response to the exilic community of Jews after the Jerusalem ideology had failed. Certainly progressives who equate “prophetic ministry” with social action would never call this second wave of practice “prophetic ministry.” This second wave, evident in the great collections of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel is an articulation of hope in response to a season of deep despair.

In the sixth century BCE, the deep assurances of the Jerusalem establishment were seen to be without force. The royal ideology was placed at risk by the termination of the monarchy (see Psalm 89:38-51). The priestly ideology was shattered by the destruction of the temple. Indeed YHWH, patron of Jerusalem, as in Psalm 46, could not withstand the threat of the Babylonians. It did not help, moreover, to credit the destruction of the city by the Babylonians to the will of YHWH, as did Jeremiah.

Given such failures and the perceived abandonment of the city by YHWH, the deportees were left to the mercy of the Babylonian gods and to the policies of the Babylonian hegemony. And indeed, the texts show that Israel had come to the end of its hope and had given up, at least provisionally, on the prospect of a good future from YHWH. Thus we have a quoted lament in Isaiah 40:27:

My way is hidden from the Lord,  
and my right is disregarded by my God (Isa. 40:27).

In Isaiah 50:2, YHWH makes a heated response against an accusation in Israel’s lament that YHWH had no power to save:

Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem?  
Or have I no power to deliver (Isa. 50:2; see 59:1)?

In Lamentations 3:16-18, the grief of failed Jerusalem is fully voiced, a termination of hope:

He has made my teeth grind on gravel,  
and made me cower in ashes;  
my soul is bereft of peace;  
I have forgotten what happiness is;  
so I say, "Gone is my glory,  
and all that I had hoped for from the Lord"  
(Lam. 3:16-18).

It is not difficult to imagine an analogue in our own society. The spectacular icon of 9/11 has symbolic force completely disproportionate to the event itself. The reason 9/11 lingers powerfully in U.S. awareness, I believe, is that the assault on the citadels of democratic capitalism (World Trade Center, Pentagon), not unlike the attack on the ancient temple in Jerusalem, demonstrated more vulnerability than we had imagined. That stark drama of vulnerability, moreover, suggested a judgment about the myth of U.S. exceptionalism, because the United States was now seen to be subject to the same history of violence that goes on everywhere else, some of it with the United States as perpetrator. That dramatic exercise of fragility has been profoundly reinforced by the more pervasive and durable economic failure still operative among us. It now dawns on very many people that the dream of endless economic growth and prosperity with its endless future prospects is now a dead end. That economic displacement, beyond that, suggests we no longer have the will or resources to solve our deepest problems.

A quite ready conclusion to draw is the public possibility that the last superpower is now hopeless. We continue to fight more-or-less meaningless wars, but the public sector—governmental or corporate—cannot or does not or will not deliver its own hopes. The outcome of despair among us is evident, then, in the turn from the public good to preoccupation with private, even selfish, good, an attempt to extort from the public good a personal stake. Indeed some who administer the public sector in fact are on the take for themselves. A concomitant of that anxious despair is the readiness for violence that now marks our despairing society, violence

against gays, Muslims, immigrants, and now an epidemic of child abuse. That violence may take the form of militia and guns rights; or more urbanely it may be enacted through tax and credit policy. And even among the affluent there is an index of self-destruction that takes many forms.

*Mutatis mutandis*, I propose that that ancient sixth century despair and loss of confidence in the future has a counterpart in *our current despair and loss of confidence in the future*. To this despair in ancient Israel, the prophets made a response. It is remarkable, but beyond doubt, that the great prophetic collections—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—continued to grow and develop after the anticipated divine judgment of 587 BCE was enacted. The prophetic traditions kept speaking, whether by the prophets or by their disciples and the scribes who edited the collections.

That “still speaking,” however, could not be a mere reiteration of what had been said previously. That truth-telling that warned the city was not now the order of the day. The laments I have just cited indicate no lingering denial over loss. Now the loss is faced and voiced. The challenge to the prophets is no longer denial; now it is *despair*. Consequently the prophetic tradition, the prophetic collections, had to speak a new word that was congruent with the first word, but now context specific. As a result, the great collections advanced with promissory statements in divine oracles:

- After the harsh judgments of Isaiah 1-39, the book is extended in exilic context to the lyrics of Isaiah 40-55.
- After the “plucking up and tearing down” of Jeremiah, chapters 29-33 cluster poetry that affirms “planting and building.”
- After the dramatic departure of YHWH from the Jerusalem temple in Ezekiel 8-10 (because YHWH could not remain in such a polluted place), we have the revisioned temple and a scenario of the return of YHWH’s glory to a restored temple (Ezek. 43-44).

Each prophetic tradition speaks in its special idiom—royal, covenantal, priestly; but each of them now voices

hope and new possibility among those who despair of YHWH's absence and abandonment. Indeed, YHWH can even acknowledge that there was an instant of divine abandonment when Israel was left without YHWH:

For a brief moment *I abandoned you,*  
 but with great compassion I will gather you.  
 In overflowing wrath for a moment  
*I hid my face from you,*  
 but with everlasting love  
 I will have compassion on you,  
 says the Lord, your Redeemer (Isa. 54:7-8).

So now comes hope grounded in YHWH's fresh resolve. That hope and new possibility for the future are not grounded in a general optimism or confidence that "things will work out." No, the hope is grounded in the explicit promises, the precise utterances of YHWH, who offers new promises amid the deep despair of exile.

In Isaiah the most extraordinary utterance of new possibility is the "salvation oracle" in which YHWH's speech and presence overcome fear:

*Do not fear,* for I am with you,  
 do not be afraid, for I am your God (Isa. 41:10).  
 ... it is I who say to you, "Do not fear,  
 I will help you (Isa. 41:13).

*Do not fear,* you worm Jacob,  
 you insect Israel (Isa. 41:14)!

*Do not fear,* for I have redeemed you;  
 I have called you by name, you are mine  
 (Isa. 43:1).

*Do not fear,* for I am with you;  
 I will bring your offspring from the east,  
 and from the west I will gather you (Isa. 43:5).

*Do not fear,* or be afraid;  
 have I not told you from of old and declared it?  
 You are my witnesses!

Is there any god besides me?

There is no other rock; I know not one (Isa. 44:8).

It is this availability and resolve on YHWH's part that permits the announcement of "good news" (gospel) that

YHWH is a powerful agent back in play, powerful enough to override imperial power and imperial gods:

Get you up on a high mountain,  
 O Zion, herald of good tidings;  
 lift up your voice with strength,  
 O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,  
 lift it up, do not fear;  
 say to the cities of Judah,  
 “Here is your God!” (Isa. 40:9).

How beautiful on the mountains  
 are the feet of the messenger  
 who announces peace,  
 who brings good news,  
 who announces salvation,  
 who says to Zion, “Your God reigns” (Isa. 52:7).

The news is that Israel will now be emancipated from the empire, free to live its life back in restored transformed Jerusalem (cf. Mark 1:1-5).

In Jeremiah, the most familiar text is the anticipation of “the new covenant” that will be one of intimacy and trust, and grounded in forgiveness. The claim is not that Israel has repented, but that YHWH has broken the cycles of alienation by an act of forgiveness:

I will *forgive* their guilt, and remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:34).

I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at the first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will *forgive* all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me (Jer. 33:7-8).

This beginning again means the city and land will be restored:

Again I will build you, and you shall be built,  
 O virgin Israel!  
 Again you shall take your tambourines,  
 and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.  
 Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant,  
 and shall enjoy the fruit (Jer. 31:4-5).

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel:  
Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be  
bought in this land (Jer. 31:15).

Fields shall be bought for money, and deeds shall be signed and sealed and witnessed, in the land of Benjamin, in the places around Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, of the hill country, of the Shephelah, and of the Negeb; for I will restore their fortunes, says the Lord (Jer. 32:44).

In Ezekiel, in addition to the rebuilt, reoccupied temple, the text provides two powerful images for restoration. In Ezekiel 34, YHWH is “the good shepherd” (king) who is contrasted with the failed kings in Jerusalem who brought on the “scattering” of exile. Now the good shepherd-king will enact restoration and well-being for that flock that is Israel:

I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out....I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice (Ezek. 34:11, 15-16).

And in 37:1-14 the prophet uses the most radical imagery possible, in order to liken restoration of Jerusalem to the resurrection of the body:<sup>3</sup>

I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall

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<sup>3</sup> On this passage and the connection between resurrection and the restoration of Israel, see Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,  
says the Lord (Ezekiel 37:12-14).

While the images vary greatly, the constant is that all of these promises are on the lips of YHWH, as given by the poets. The language attests to YHWH's deep resolve in which YHWH pledges, in very tough circumstance, to enact an historical newness for the chosen.

In that ancient world, *exilic despair* is met with *promissory hope*. The poets dared to voice YHWH's own resolve, a resolve that left only two questions: What did YHWH say? Will YHWH do what YHWH says? The invitation of the promises is to move into that anticipated future, to depart the old circumstance of despair, to take initiatives that are trusted to be in response to YHWH's promised initiatives.

This second wave of prophetic leadership is an urgent one. If it turns out, as I have suggested, that the symbol of 9/11 and the reality of economic failure together create a circumstance of despair, then prophetic ministry has as its task the insistence that God gives a new future beyond that despair. The immediate question for "prophetic ministry" is, "What did God say?" Can we imagine and articulate in lyric fashion God's will for the future? What is yet intended by God?

While this second wave of prophetic work may be more welcome for all parties, it is not for that reason so easy. We do indeed hold to our denial tenaciously. But we also will not easily be talked out of our recalcitrant despair. Think, however, what it would mean if the church were the most promissory venue in town. This is not, in prophetic tradition, a promise of life after death or immortality. Nor is it a "gospel of prosperity" in any conventional sense. It is rather a conviction that God is resolved to create a new covenantal community of neighbors that in the New Testament is termed "The Kingdom of God." And when Jesus asserts to the Roman governor that "My kingdom is not from this world," (John 18:36), he does not mean anything "other-worldly." Rather he means that the newness will not arise from the residue of empire. It will be a newness wrought out of

God's presence in the world. It must have been the case anciently, that many could not believe the promises and "turned away." But the tradition is sustained by that daring minority who judge that God's promissory word is more compelling and more reliable, all the data of despair to the contrary. It is as urgent to *tell hope* in the face of despair as it is to *tell truth* in the face of denial.

### Through God, Truth and Hope Can Prevail

From the foregoing exposition, four conclusions occur to me.

1. The prophetic ministry of *truth and hope* depends upon a witness to the vitality and fidelity of God as an effective agent in the world. As was said so famously by Dostoyevsky, "Without God, everything is permitted."<sup>4</sup> Without God, endless denial is possible; without God bottomless despair is possible.

Prophetic ministry, to the contrary, moves from the reality of God. *It is because of God that truth can be spoken.* The world is not happenstance, nor is it a tale told by an idiot. It is an arena of sustained meaning and purpose in which all creatures are answerable for their creatureliness. Truth in a prophetic practice consists in tracing out that answerability that is inescapable in God's creation.

*It is because of God that hope can be spoken.* Hope, the conviction of things not seen, is grounded in God's faithful intention. Consequently the proper stance for life in the world is to be on the alert for the newness that God will permit and will enact. It is the reality of God that prevents the world from falling into meaninglessness

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<sup>4</sup> Of this famous aphorism Rowan Williams, *Dostoyevsky: Language, Faith + Fiction* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 73, has written:

The ego moves into the vacant place of God. "Everything is permitted"—which means not simply that all crime is legitimate but that all valuation must come simply from the willing self. As Evdokimov notes, if everything is permitted in a world without God, so is the love of God and neighbor, but what cannot be sustained is any sense of the anchorage of such a policy in the nature of things.

destruction of neighbor and of self. It is the reality of God that prevents prophetic ministry from being reduced to not more than social justice advocacy.

2. The relationship of truth and hope is a delicate one that depends upon discerning pastoral judgment. In a dramatic way, truth precedes hope. Thus they are related, but in a sequence. It is of course possible to stay too long in such truthfulness, forever critiquing and warning and analyzing. But of course there is at least as much danger, if not more, of rushing too soon to hope, before truth breaks the denial. Hope practiced in denial is no hope at all. Thus a prophetic pastor must have an acute sense about the world and know, in context, what word needs to be uttered and to be heard.

3. The New Testament practice of truth and hope is, not surprisingly, Friday and Sunday. Friday is the elemental day of prophetic truth telling, when the violence of empire is fully disclosed, and the Messiah is vulnerable before the power of the empire. It is on Friday that the things that are “are reduced to nothing” (I Cor. 1:28). Conversely Sunday is the great day of hope when the Easter resurrection creates new possibilities for the world, when the church learns that the world is not fated into a timeless present tense. Hope is the conviction that God “calls into existence things that do not exist,” precisely the message of the exilic prophets that I have cited (Rom. 4:17).

4. All of this is impossible in a local congregation! I know that very well, dear reader-pastor. Congregations, not unlike pastors, have an artistic, tenacious capacity to protect our denial, to guard our despair so that we need relinquish neither.

But here is the deal: You, dear reader, do not need to be Amos or Jeremiah or Ezekiel, any more than I do. You need only be yourself in all your bold faithfulness. The burden of what I have written above is that you take a deep breath and notice what it is that is entrusted to your ministry.

We now live in a culture (and in congregations) that are *required to relinquish* much that is old that we have

treasured, not unlike the relinquishment of king and temple in ancient Jerusalem. That same culture (and our congregations) is now *required to receive* from God a newly shaped world that we do not fully understand, discern, or welcome. We are thus not unlike the Jews in the sixth century who had to receive a new world and a new Jerusalem that was not what they had known. So imagine the prophetic task of helping that *required relinquishment* and that *necessary reception*. That is what they did in the eighth century as they anticipated an ending of what was in Jerusalem. That is what they did in the sixth century as they anticipated an emerging newness not of their own making. Such prophetic work does not need to be done in anger. It need only be done in faithfulness, not giving in to the illusions we regularly prefer. It is indeed an awesome calling!