

## Discerning the Signs of the Times

It's often thought that a prophet is someone who foresees the future. There's a grain of truth in this, but when it comes to the biblical prophets of Judaism and Christianity, the foretelling of events is hardly what prophecy is all about.

Biblical prophecy is not primarily about prediction, it's about authentic, morally and spiritually faithful response to what is happening in the world we inhabit – where “what is happening” is understood in the context of the Divine Purpose for the human community.

“What is happening” can be filled with promise, it can be ambiguous, or it can signal warning and danger. It can be seen as an expression of grace, or a means of judgment. Or it can be viewed in some other way that relates to what human beings are able to fathom as the will or work of God.

The prophet is primarily an interpreter, one who does not “foretell,” but “forth-tells” (that is, “tells forth”) what can be understood as the meaning or significance of on-going events in light of the Divine Purpose.

Put in more secular terms, the prophet is one who is engaged in discerning the signs of the times.

The false prophet is one who gets it wrong most of the time. The true prophet is one whose clarity of vision and depth of understanding are sufficient to be able to see what has gone right or wrong, what needs to be done, and quite possibly, where it all will lead. If prophets are at times able to foresee the future, it is only because they are able to interpret the past and grasp the present in such a way that they can tell something important about what is likely to happen in the future. False prophets lack this ability, or are simply pursuing their own agendas.

When things look grim, a true prophet may see possibilities that others have failed to note. The true prophet may have words of promise and hope that help lift up and sustain others in their struggles. More often, however, the true prophet may have to speak inconvenient truths, words that others are unwilling and perhaps even unable to hear. It was not uncommon for the biblical prophets to be persecuted for their words of warning and judgment. Human communities often prefer to reject the messenger rather than heed the message.

In our recent common history, no one would seem to be more fittingly regarded as a true prophet than Martin Luther King, Jr. He was much more controversial during his lifetime than today – in part because we Americans have been moved to recognize the racism that remains embedded in our society, but also because some of King's message has been domesticated and neglected. We all remember his “I Have a Dream” speech and the movement it inspired toward greater racial equality. We all do not remember his “Beyond Vietnam” speech, in which he decried America's culture of violence and its three components of racism, excessive materialism, and militarism. Fifty-three years later, we continue to be plagued by this triplet of inseparably malignant “isms.”

The July 20/27 cover of Time Magazine proclaims that we are now facing our “one last chance”

to save the planet and human civilization. Many people are faithfully discerning the signs of the times, from the scourges of COVID-19 to racism, militarism, and the materialistic exploitation of our environment. Tragically, most of the powers-that-be would rather retain power than save the planet or their souls. We must heed the messengers and the messages of the true prophets in our midst.

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