

## ***“Taking Our Place Among the Prophets”***

Rev. David Gregory

January 10, 2021

Epiphany 1



*Baptism of Jesus*  
James Tissot

### **Readings**

*Mark 1:9-11 from the New Revised Standard Version*

Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

From *The Time Is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage*

by Joan Chittister

It has been said that every community needs at least one prophet. The poet Mary Oliver may have written the best definition of what it means to be a prophet in contemporary spirituality. She writes, “Instructions for living a life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.”

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In the world we once inhabited, we would be gathering on Sunday morning at the top of Rock Hill Road to enjoy the rites and rituals we have created for ourselves over the course of many years. There would be happy greetings, singing and laughter, and lots and lots of hugs. We cannot duplicate these rituals, but we’re doing our best to approximate them during this difficult period, and in meantime we are discovering new and perhaps even more meaningful ways of being together.

Ours is a strong and loving community whose members and friends care deeply for one another. While we’re not prone to literalism where the scriptures are concerned, we find it an easy thing to respond to biblical admonitions by weeping with those who weep and by rejoicing with those who rejoice. We watch out for one another. We pray for one another. We tend one another’s wounds and freely offer nourishment of body, soul, and spirit. I hear it often said that “This is who we are.” It’s not a haughty declaration, just a recognition that this is a unique community that has found simple, honest ways of living the gospel message without succumbing to the smugness that often accompanies dogma and doctrine.

One thing I've noted during this historic and unprecedented week is how we also anchor one another in times of anxiety and fear. As I was preparing to lead a brief communion on Wednesday, I began to see some disturbing headlines that prompted me to flip on the television. Like many of you, I became mesmerized by the stunning images of our nation's capitol under siege. I kept looking back and forth from the TV screen to my computer screen where I was about to initiate a Zoom call, feeling torn between the escalation I was seeing on the other side of the country and the presence of mind and spirit that awaited me in communion with some of you who were preparing to join me. I was rattled. I found it difficult to concentrate or to form words. It really wasn't the words that were important in those moments. It was the experience and meaning of "vigil," a creation of space for all that we were feeling, while remembering that we remain always in the presence of Divine and Holy Spirit. And where the Spirit is, there is always peace.

On this first Sunday of the Epiphany season, we remember the baptism of Jesus, where it is said that the heavens opened and a voice said, "This is my beloved in whom I am well pleased," all of this as the Spirit came and rested upon Jesus in the form of a dove. It was a signal of peace, of divine purpose, and divine pleasure, and it would normally occupy my sermonizing on a day like this, but this is one of those weeks when preachers everywhere can feel their preparations hijacked by current events.

John F. Kennedy was murdered on a Friday, and my guess is that very few of the previously prepared sermons got delivered two days later. There are weekly rhythms to the work that ministers do, but it sometimes happens that those rhythms fall prey to human events so stunning or horrific that we need our prophetic voices to speak out about them. We attempt to find words that bring comfort, stability, and meaning in moments that seem frightening or hopeless.

This past Wednesday, we witnessed what amounts to a rape of our democracy. I apologize if that language feels strong, but I cannot find other words that seem adequate. Later in the day—and into the night—we witnessed some profiles of uncommon courage, when enough lawmakers in both parties of our divided government were able to put principle above raw power and pay honor to the Constitution and the rule of law. In the wee hours of the next morning, our republic was still intact. It was the first time in my life that I had ever questioned that it would remain so.

This feeling of uncertainty is what drove me back to the writings of Sister Joan Chittester, a Benedictine nun, and a prolific author known for her progressive convictions and prophetic voice. About a year and a half ago she published a book entitled *The Time Is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage*, which seems to be her very eloquent way of saying to anyone who will listen, "Enough is enough." She has always been a champion of those who are poor, disempowered, or excluded. But there is a tone in this book that, while indeed there is hope for a world that seems lost and struggling, it is up to us—NOW—to exercise our prophetic voices to say in a single chorus that we will be pushed no further.

Sister Joan reminds us of a long list of ancient Hebrew prophets who were not out to win any popularity contests. They had never heard of political expediency, and they didn't really care about hurting anybody's feelings. They were simply there to bear witness to the reality of injustice, to cry out against it, and to call people to a new and better path. In her book Sister Joan simply asks all of us to do the same. Every preacher has a role to play in the prophetic path, but she says it is not the sole province of those who have religious vocations. We all must take our place among the prophets. She calls us to "prophetic community," to the kind that becomes a voice and a force in society. If, in some way, we become

confused as to how to do that, she makes it plain and simple by going directly to Mary Oliver, the late poet who is nothing less than the patron saint of our own community. “Mary Oliver,” she says, “may have written the best definition of what it means to be a prophet in contemporary spirituality. She writes, ‘Instructions for living a life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.’”

This week we have been paying attention. There has been no choice but to do so. And we have been astonished at what we’ve seen. There was no other possible response. And now, it seems, we’re simply called to tell about it. The role of the prophet is simply this: truth-telling. And what if it doesn’t go well? In answer to that question, Sister Joan says:

*When the discussion is real, there is at least a chance that some hearts will warm to the possibility, to the imperative for change.*

*The message is clear to us .... The prophetic insight never wanes, even when it is not wanted and despite the fact that it is not being heard. It is a deeply spiritual moment for public truth-tellers. When our work does not succeed externally, it is time for the internal work of the Spirit to become more important than ever. It is time then to double our efforts for spiritual depth.*

For those of us who find encouragement today with the prospect of a welcome change in our national leadership, let us not forget that our collective voice is needed now more than it ever was. And if we intend to go farther, we must first go deeper.

