Emmanuel Episcopal Church  
811 Cathedral Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on 
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 5, 2009

**Babushkas and Other Prophets**

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

I want to begin with a story I really like. It’s a story told by James Billington, the Librarian of Congress, who happened to be in Moscow during August of 1991, during the time when the old Soviet regime was giving way to a new social order. Many of you remember those tense, dangerous couple of days when Boris Yeltsin and about 150 others successfully faced down the tanks and troops of the world’s largest armed forces in the capital city of the world’s largest empire. But here’s the part I really like. Billington notes that a key role in this crucial event in the fall of communism was played by the babushkas, the old women who had kept the Orthodox Church alive during the communist period.

Like I said, I really like this story, perhaps because I like saying the word *babushka*. But that is neither here nor there. Here’s how Billington recounts those events. “There was another group that played a key role that has never been adequately recognized — seemingly the most implausible group of all: the babushkas, those old women with bandanas whom sophisticated Western tourists always noted but never spoke to. I happened to be meeting with a large group of them early on the second and decisive night of the crisis when martial law and a death-sentence curfew were suddenly proclaimed over the putsch-controlled television. Spontaneously and without discussion, the babushkas all left the meeting – not to go home as they had been ordered, but to join the young men on the barricades and other elderly women who had been rebuking the soldiers in the tanks that surrounded the Russian White House.” Some of the babushkas climbed onto the tanks and peered through the slits at the crew-cut men inside, and told them that there were new orders, these from God: Thou shalt not kill. “Lacking clear orders from their military superiors, these young men were now getting moral commands from a rival authority – their mothers.”

The attack never came, and as Billington says, “by the dawn of the third day we realized that the tide had turned.” “What could otherwise have escalated into a macho contest of power between the crew cuts in the tanks and their pony-tailed cousins on the barricades was headed off by precisely, those ‘old women in the church’ that Western observers no less than Soviet propagandists had patronizingly dismissed as symbolizing the death of religion in the USSR.”

I love those those babushkas! This morning I would like to think of the babushkas as prophets.

There is a popular misconception that prophets are people who predict the future. At least, it’s a misunderstanding of the nature of prophecy in Ancient Israel. In Israel, a prophet was not primarily someone who looked into the future, but rather someone
who had insight into the present. Actually, I think prophets in Israel were more influenced by the past than they were by the future. They reached back to the deepest roots of their religious tradition and tried to summon people to be faithful to them in the present. So a prophet is someone who speaks on behalf of their religious tradition, speaks on behalf of God, speaks on behalf of justice and mercy, and speaks on behalf of those who have no one to speak for them, folks like the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner. So a prophet speaks on behalf of God’s justice and mercy in the present. They speak to a particular community calling its people to live in accordance with the desires of God and to respect the rights and dignity of those folks who are often the most vulnerable members of society.

This is why I think the babushkas were prophets. In the crisis in Moscow, when the tanks had surrounded the Russian White House, they reminded people of God’s moral command, Thou Shalt Not Kill, and through their faithful witness, they played a large part in the avoidance of bloodshed and in the eventual fall of communism.

But is not easy being a prophet. As long as the community you in likes your message, then everything is fine and dandy. But when a prophet criticizes their community and calls on people to reform their ways, then they are often met with anger and rejection. It takes courage to be a prophet. A prophet has to face stubbornness, rejection, and possibly even death. Those babushkas stared into the slits in the tanks and said to the crew-cut men inside that they were there to deliver new orders from God: Thou shalt not kill. Those babushkas were prophets and they helped change the world.

This morning both of our lessons are about how hard it is to be a prophet. The lesson from Ezekiel is about his commissioning to be a prophet. And what does it say? What’s the job description? “I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’” Okay, this does not sound like much fun. But will this impudent and stubborn people at least listen? No guarantees. “Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.”

I don’t know about you, but this doesn’t sound like a very good job to me. Being sent to impudent and stubborn people, who most likely won’t listen to you, doesn’t sound easy. Being a prophet is hard work!

Jesus found this out in our Gospel lesson for this morning. In many ways Jesus was a prophet who proclaimed the nearness of God’s kingdom, who urged people to take a second look at their lives, and who acted out God’s mercy by associating with the vulnerable and suspect people of his day. He upset many people’s hopes for a nationalistic messiah, by proclaiming instead that we ought to forgive our enemies and ought to accept outsiders. So when Jesus was teaching these things in the synagogue in his hometown, people took offense. But being prophet, what else did he expect? As he says, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” Like I said, it is not easy to be a prophet.

I guess that’s part of the deal. Being a prophet is not about being liked. And it is not even about being successful. Ezekiel was told people wouldn’t listen to him and Jesus offended the people in his hometown. The point isn’t to be liked or even to be successful, but to be faithful and courageous in speaking the truth, in standing up for justice, and in speaking up on behalf of those who have no one to speak for them. Being a prophet is hard work.
What might it mean to be prophetic today?

I suppose, for many of us, some examples of twentieth century prophets come to mind. People like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi and Dorothy Day. These folks gave their lives for the cause of justice and peace, and spoke up on behalf of the most vulnerable members in their societies. I think we’d be right to call these folks prophets, and I think many would say, despite the controversy that surrounded their lives, that they stood on the side of justice and they helped make the world a better place.

On this Fourth of July Weekend, when we give thanks for the freedoms of this great country, I think we can recognize the great wisdom in our Constitution, that in providing for freedom of religion and for freedom of speech, in a certain sense, it makes space for prophets, for those people and communities, who speak up on behalf of justice and mercy, and who speak up on behalf of the most vulnerable members of our society. In a certain sense, our Constitution makes rooms for prophets because it is in the interests of the greater good. I think there is real wisdom here, wisdom that has served this great country of ours well.

So what might it mean to be a prophet today?

Some may be called like Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Jr. to give their lives completely for the cause of justice in this land. There are some remarkable people and communities who are completely dedicated to living with and serving the poor in the world. Our Ferris Lecturer last year, Jim Wallis, and the members of the Sojourners community have been living with and serving poor folks in Washington DC for over thirty years. These are important and inspiring examples of prophetic witness in our day.

However, I don’t think all of us are being called to be prophetic in such dramatic ways. I don’t think we should feel guilty about this, but I also don’t think we should go to the other extreme and say that there is nothing we can do to make the world a better place. The prophetic call to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God is probably tugging at each of our hearts and calling us to act in those areas of life where we do have some choice and do have some control. In the ways in which we pursue a living, the places we choose to live, the way we use our wealth and resources, the way we treat others, the ways we vote and get involved in political action, we can ask ourselves, Are we acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God and God’s desires for justice? When it comes to making decisions, we can consider not only our own self-interest, but also the interests of justice and perhaps especially the interests of those who are the most vulnerable members of society.

I think to ask these questions in our society is to be prophetic. I think to ask these questions in the context of prayer is to be a prophetic people in the tradition of ancient Israel and of Jesus of Nazareth. We have many inspiring examples of people who have been great prophets in our time, people like Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King. But, in a certain sense, we have churches filled with prophets, ordinary men and women, who come before the presence of God and ask themselves what it means, in the particularities of their lives, to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God. These ordinary prophets are blessing our lives and our communities in countless and unsung ways. And who knows what will happen when these ordinary prophets, who have been keeping the church alive for years, are confronted with great injustice at their own doorsteps. They may rise up and find the courage within themselves and within their faith to stare down a tank.

I love those babushkas!