

**“The Last Prophet?”**  
**1 Samuel 3:1-10**  
**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**  
**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
**January 14, 2018**

As the title of the film - *The Last Jedi* - suggests, the latest Star Wars installment explores the possibility of there being no more Jedi. I don't want to give away the plot for those who have not seen the film, and some of you may not care about Star Wars, we can address that shortcoming another time, but I think I can say without fear of giving away anything that Luke Skywalker lies at the center of this inquiry.

We know this from the way the last film ended. Might he be the last Jedi? You'll have to see the film in order to explore that question in more detail, but it seems to me that we ask a similar question from time to time as to whether we have seen and heard from the last prophet.

This weekend we reflect upon the ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Most now consider him to have been a prophet, but while he was alive, the nation was divided about his ministry. Many Christians opposed his message of racial integration and social justice. In fact, not all African-American churches were onboard with his witness. Some felt the church should stay out of the political arena, no matter what.

But today, most agree that Dr. King's message was prophetic. It is often the case that prophets are not appreciated in their time. They are often ridiculed and insulted, run out of town or killed like Dr. King. And there are often multiple people claiming to speak for God, but speaking in diametrically opposed ways. Only from the perspective of history can we discern who actually spoke for God – Amos, not Amaziah; Jeremiah, not the other prophets; Dr. King, not the white supremacists who stood behind Bull Connor and George Wallace.

But while most now view Dr. King to have been a prophet, many wonder whether we have seen the last prophet. Does God still call

prophets today? What would their role be? Who would listen even if a prophet were to speak? And if there are multiple voices claiming to speak for God, how do we discern who actually is?

We don't have time to explore all of these questions, but in the familiar narrative of 1 Samuel 3, we find a story that might help us to get at some of the most important concerns.

As the story begins, we realize that this narrative is set in a time like ours. The writer says, "Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days. Visions were not widespread." Perhaps they too thought they had heard from the last prophet.

We don't know whether God was not speaking to the people or the people were not listening, but either way the word of the Lord was not getting through, and it needed to get through. There were problems in the land, as there are in ours, we'll get to that a bit later.

Anyway, the writer sets the stage. The word of the Lord is rare. Now it will come through a new voice, a new prophet, his name is Samuel. He's just a boy, but he is the one God chooses, though the wise old priest Eli will help him realize that the voice he is hearing is God's.

We know the story. Samuel hears a voice speaking to him in the night. "Samuel! Samuel!" the voice says, but he doesn't realize it is God. He thinks it is Eli, since he is the only other person in the temple, but Eli says it is not him and tells him to go back and lie down.

This happens three times and finally Eli realizes it is God who is speaking. So, he tells Samuel to go back and lie down, but this time when the voice speaks, to respond by saying, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Samuel does as he is told, God calls out to him again, Samuel responds as Eli has instructed, and just past where we have stopped reading, God calls Samuel to his work (1 Samuel 3:11-20).

It has the feeling of being a nice, little, heartwarming story. It has been used in efforts to encourage young people to consider ministry.

There is even something called the Samuel Project. And all of this is fine, but if we read just a bit further and examine the work to which God is calling Samuel, we realize this is not a nice, little, heartwarming story. Samuel is called to be a prophet and prophets don't come to pat us on the back and tell us how well we are doing. They come to bring us a message from God about something in our lives that needs to change.

The first mistaken idea many have about prophets is that they come to predict the future, often the far distant future. In fact, while prophets may have a word about what will happen in the near future if people do not change and sometimes even if they do, their primary concern is to relay God's perspective on what is going on right now. What kind of God would speak to people in a certain time, but ignore their needs while addressing the needs of people living hundreds or thousands of years later? There may be a secondary meaning of ancient words, but their primary meaning applied to ancient times.

The second mistaken view many have is that prophets are clearly recognized as such and thus welcomed by the faithful. Rarely is this the case. Rather, prophets are ridiculed and rejected by those they come to help, but help with tough love, by delivering a message of judgment.

For Samuel, the first word of judgment has to be delivered to his beloved mentor, Eli, the one who has helped him discern God's call. To his credit, Eli encourages Samuel to deliver his message, whatever it is, because Eli is a man of faith and he believes Samuel has heard from God. The message is that Eli's house will be punished forever.

He has not sinned directly. His sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are the guilty parties. They are called scoundrels earlier in the text (1 Samuel 2:12). They are said to have blasphemed against God (1 Samuel 3:13). Their specific sins include taking animals brought for sacrifice for their personal food and sleeping with the women who stand at the gates of the temple in Shiloh (1 Samuel 2:13-17, 22).

Blaspheming scoundrels they are, the word of judgment comes, and both Hophni and Phinehas die in battle. As we have noted, Eli is not

directly implicated in the sin, but he is still part of the problem. He has allowed his sons to cheapen the priesthood, he has looked the other way or at least been too soft in his judgment. So, he too is responsible in a way. There is a lesson here for us as well. We will get to that too.

So, what can we learn about the prophetic in our time from this ancient story about calling? For one thing, we must assume that God continues to call prophets unless we are of the opinion that there is no longer any concern for God to address because we are living as we should, church and society are what they should be, and the beloved community has arrived. I assume we are not of that opinion!

God still calls prophets as long as there is a need for the prophetic. The only questions are as to who the true prophets are and whether we are willing to listen. If history, including salvation history, tells us anything, the answer to the second question is – probably not, at least not right away. Rarely has the covenant community been willing to listen to the prophetic when the message first comes.

As to the first question, rather than trying to identify specific possibilities for prophets, it might be more helpful to identify specific concerns needing prophetic attention in our time. To a certain extent, this alone is a prophetic task, which makes me a bit uncomfortable not just because I have no intention of claiming to be a prophet, but because it is almost impossible for a parish minister to assume a prophetic role, no matter how desperately it may be needed and called for by God.

Years after I had Frank Tupper as a theology professor in Louisville, I served as his pastor in Winston-Salem. One Sunday after worship, I reminded Frank of something he said to our class about the prophetic. He said, “As a pastor of a local church, you cannot preach one prophetic sermon for every priestly sermon. You have to preach nine priestly sermons for every prophetic one.”

After decades of parish ministry, I was affirming the truth of this claim, but Frank looked at me and said, “Did I say that? Really? I’m

not sure a parish minister can ever proclaim the prophetic.” There may have been more truth in that claim, at least in churches like ours. So, without any assumption of prophetic voice and with a bit of fear and trembling, let me suggest a few concerns needing prophetic attention.

One obvious concern is the central sin of our nation – racism. It still exists even fifty years after civil rights legislation. Legal changes do not immediately effect change in regard to social and economic realities and when we realize that slavery existed for several hundred years, how could we think that this would not take a very long time?

We are not the only nation to experience racial and ethnic tensions. Throughout history, human beings have always found a way to dehumanize those who are different. But we have our own particular history that still haunts us. This past year’s events in Charlottesville, tensions over how persons of color are treated by the legal system, and the intense debates about these concerns underscore just how much we still struggle with race. We may not need exactly the same kind of prophet we have had before, but we still have a need for the prophetic.

Another concern has to do with the demeaning, harassment and abuse of women. After decades of little progress, it seems like the lid has blown off of this powder keg over the past weeks. Prominent figures have been forced to step down from roles of influence as women have come forward in droves to address a very serious problem and some men have had the courage to speak out as well.

In the realm of abuse, whether of women, children or anyone else, there are always primary offenders, but often there are also people with secondary responsibility because they know about the problem but fail to take appropriate action. They are the Elis of our time and make no mistake, they are just as guilty. I think of the abuse at Penn State some years back. I think of clergy who were protected by superiors or colleagues. There is a need for prophetic voices to speak to this concern.

Yet another prophetic concern has to do with the current reality for the church in this nation. As I have noted before, the percentage of

Americans who attend church on any given Sunday is drifting rapidly toward single digits. Some churches have experienced growth and Sunday attendance is not the only measure of faith, we are a much more mobile society, but the big picture for the church is not pretty.

The rise of the so-call “nones” combined with skepticism about institutional religion, not to mention our own reticence to give witness to our faith, is raising questions about the church’s future. Of course, as a wise professor once said, if the church depended solely on us, it would have died a long time ago. It doesn’t, it depends more on God, so it will continue to exist. But we are passing through a challenging time, a time which cries out for a prophetic word.

One last concern in need of a prophetic word I would mention today, one that may be related to the previous one, has to do with the relationship between faith and science. Far too often the church has feared any new bit of knowledge, as if we might discover something that would do away with faith and the very existence of God. It’s an absurd notion. Genuine faith has nothing to fear from the growth of knowledge. But still the church exhibits such fear in every generation.

In the time of Galileo, some thought the claim that the earth is not the flat center of the universe was not only wrong, but dangerous because if people were allowed to believe this, all faith would be lost. In the time of Darwin, many thought the theory of evolution was in conflict with biblical stories of creation and thus threatened the very foundation of our faith. Many still believe this. And today many are deeply troubled by new understandings of sexuality, genetics and the possibility of space travel. Many in the church fear knowledge.

But the truth is we have nothing to fear. Science explores the details of life, how things work, what causes what. Religion explores the nature of life and its foundation, the existence of God and the meaning of life, the possibility of an afterlife. Science and religion ask different questions and thus pursue truth in ways that are not often in conflict. Sometimes scientific discoveries force us to rethink our

understanding of some part of God's world, perhaps even our understanding of God, but more often such discoveries complement our faith and enable it to grow.

Our own Divine Kumah, physics professor at N. C. State University, gave a wonderful testimony last Wednesday as a part of his larger story. He talked about the ways in which his work simply makes him believe that much more in God. He talked about faith and science benefitting each other. He talked about the awe one has for God's creation, an awe that only grows as we understand it more and more.

It many ways, Divine is offering a prophetic witness simply by doing what he does while holding on to his faith. Not all prophets stand behind pulpits or preach on street corners. Many offer a prophetic word simply by how they live each day. And what Divine does is critical for our time, critical in and of itself, and critical for us to learn from.

The future lies with those who embrace new learning about the world. We are not going back in history, no matter how much some would like to. The church which thrives in the future, the future which will be able to connect with the "nones" of our time, will be the church that finds a way to integrate scientific and spiritual modes of inquiry, the church which realizes that we have nothing to fear from knowledge.

So, we have not heard from the last prophet, there are many sacred concerns that cry out for a word from the Lord, and I haven't even mentioned the central subject of most biblical prophets - economic injustice - or the pressing matter of how we relate to people of other faiths. The good news is God will call prophets to bring us the word we need. The only question is – will we be willing to listen?