

*“Prophet, Priest and King”* by The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart  
Sermon delivered at First Unitarian Church of Worcester  
October 15, 2017

When the ancient Israelites wanted to have a king, God was not at all sure that was a good idea. “You don’t need a king,” God said. “Kings are bad news. They get puffed up about themselves, and they begin comparing themselves to me.

“The way you do things now is fine. When you have disputes, you choose a wise person to judge what’s right. When you need to fight, you choose a strong person to be your war leader. Between times, you take care of yourselves. Believe me, I see all kinds of societies,” God said, “and you do not want a king.”

“But our enemies will destroy us in war,” the Israelites said. “They are more organized because they have a king. We must have a king if we are to survive.”

“Very well, I will appoint one among you to be the king,” said God. “But listen, even the king can’t have total power over you. So the king will not be the only authority. You will also have priests, who perform my rituals and may come into my presence. They will help you understand the sacred law.

“And you will have prophets, who will live on the edges of your society. They will go among ordinary people, and into the wilderness, and into the bad parts of town. They may be a little wild. But they will help you know when you are doing right as a people and when you need to repent. They will help you see the kind of future you are headed toward. They will also be leaders among you.”

“Thanks, God!” the people said. History tells us that the Israelites moved from being a loose confederation of tribes whose disputes were settled by judges, to being a more unified nation with a king. The kingdom entered a golden age under the leadership of Saul, David and Solomon.

But the evidence also tells us that even after it had a king, Israel continued to have other important leaders: priests who served in the Temple and performed the most sacred rites, and prophets who held the people and the king to account. Think of the priest going into the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. Or think of the prophet saying, “What does God require of you, but to do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?” These people, as much as the king, were leaders in ancient Israel.

These stories are part of our heritage. Protestantism is built on the belief that every faithful person is a priest in some way, a person with direct access to the divine. Unitarian Universalism affirms as well the “prophethood of every believer,” the responsibility of each person and each congregation to uphold the moral voice of society.

Now we find ourselves, as a nation, in a time when our leader, the executive if not the king, is morally vacant. So our everyday leadership and moral presence in our families, workplaces and communities is more important than ever. We are called, every day, to be prophets, priests and kings—or leaders—in our lives.

Because Judaism is part of our heritage as Unitarian Universalists, we have inherited some of our understanding of leadership from the Hebrew Bible. We still use the distinctions between sacred leadership, prophetic leadership, and executive leadership. Part of our heritage, too, is the belief that all these forms of leadership are accessible by all people.

On Halloween this year it will be the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, that moment when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of a Wittenburg church. One of his reforming ideas was a commitment to the “priesthood of all believers.” It is part of our Protestant heritage to believe that each person has direct access to the divine.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm that all people have a Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder...which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life. We believe every person can experience the holy and sacred in their life. You may know this through prayer, meditation, ritual movement, dance, music, or sacred meals.

We also believe that we have the ability to bring the presence of the Holy to one another in compassion. When we visit someone in the hospital, when we give time and money to those in need, or even when we simply listen to someone, we show each other the face of God. The presence of the divine is something everyone can know and feel, through transcendence or through something as simple and sacred as human companionship.

Just as each of us can be a priest, all of us are called to be prophets for the truth we seek after in love. 450 years after Martin Luther, Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams called for a “prophethood of all believers.” He believed the liberal church had a prophetic role to play in society.

James Luther Adams, a minister and a professor at Harvard Divinity School, wrote, “A church that does not concern itself with the struggle in history for human decency and justice, a church that does not show concern for the shape of things to come, a church that does not attempt to interpret the signs of the times, is not a prophetic church.”

Adams knew just how much the prophetic church was needed. He studied in Germany in the late 1920s and again for a year in 1935-36. He witnessed the rising tide of Nazism. He was questioned by the Gestapo and some of his German colleagues were imprisoned in concentration camps.

The main Protestant churches in Germany during the Third Reich became the German Christian church, a collaborating church. Adams and his friends worked with the “underground church,” the dissenting church, which was much smaller. Adams became convinced through these experiences that the church must speak out against evil. It must hew to its moral center. It must organize and strategize to bring about its ethics in the real world, here and now. Even in times of peace and prosperity, the church, like the Hebrew prophets, must point toward what is actually required of decent human beings.

Adams asked himself: “If Fascism should arise in the States, what in your past performance would constitute a pattern or framework of resistance?” At the time, he writes, “I could give only a feeble answer to the question.” But his life’s work became the development and support of prophetic institutions.

Our church is called to be just such an institution. It is our duty to work for our values and speak on behalf of our values. We must speak out against the pernicious racism in American society. We must confront sexual assault which goes unchecked among people with power. We must protest the mass violence of shootings, crime, and war.

And because we inherit the prophethood of all believers, we must believe in a leadership of all believers. The king is not going to save us and a wicked king might condemn us. Especially in times of great anxiety and weak political leadership, we are called to be leaders in our own lives.

God warned Israel against a king. The problem with a king is that so much rides on the moral character and leadership skill of just one person. In our nation, we are learning the dangers of having a leader whose moral character is vacant and whose leadership skill is the power of the bully.

The ancient prophets were not shy about their role as leaders. They spoke up against a wicked king when they saw one. Jeremiah condemned the wicked king Jehoiakim. This king did not respect the moral voice of the prophets. He murdered the prophet Uriah and would have murdered Jeremiah except that Jeremiah went into hiding. Jeremiah accused Jehoiakim of dishonesty, an uncaring attitude toward the poor, greed, warmongering, and callousness.

These are the hallmarks of a morally corrupt leader. He cares more for his profits than for his people. He stirs up war for no reason. He sees himself as bound by no debt. He does not care for the poor and needy among his subjects. He cannot abide criticism. He cannot set aside his own wants to serve the needs of others. He is ruled by his prejudices and cannot hear the voice of the holy calling him back to righteousness. If it sounds like I am describing the President of our United States as much as I am an ancient Judaic king, it is because humanity has always recognized the qualities of immoral leadership.

What leadership requires has not changed. Moral leadership requires strength of character, humility, vision, purpose, a commitment to justice for all, and compassion for the people one leads. Moral leadership is service to the people, not control of the people. It is consideration of all the people, even the poor and needy—especially the poor and needy—in the community.

If we are not going to have this kind of leadership in our nation for the time being—and it seems we are not—it is more important than ever that we become just this kind of moral leader in our own communities. We can be leaders in our families, our workplaces, and our communities, bringing a vision of a world made whole which we desperately need.

Moral leadership in a family looks like respect and caring. It's talking about our feelings instead of acting them out. It's being kind to one another, saying thank you and I'm proud of you, it's allowing each person in the family to have a voice appropriate to their age. Leaders offer creative solutions to problems and try to bring others in. Leaders help articulate the family's values and look for ways to live according to those values. It's not just parents or elders who can be this kind of leader. My children have led me when I could not see which way to go. Our children can remind us of our values. Leadership in a family is the most intimate way of conducting ourselves in an ethical life.

Moral leadership in a workplace means helping to build a culture of ethics and respect. It's treating one's coworkers as humans with dignity, and coming to their defense when their dignity is compromised. As moral workers, we keep in mind what's right and wrong even as we go about our working lives. It's knowing that the public sector, corporations and non-profit organizations can be institutions which help create good in the world, and that it's our responsibility to do our part.

Moral leadership in a community looks like what our community has done in the wake of Hurricane Maria's devastation of Puerto Rico, or what the Santa Rosa community is doing to weather the terrible California fires.

Worcester has a significant Puerto Rican community. This community has provided leadership to help alleviate the suffering after Hurricane Maria. These leaders are raising money and donations to send to the island. At an interfaith service to support Puerto Rico last week, we heard from people who still haven't heard from their loved ones

on the island. Their hearts are breaking. But still they show up as leaders in their community here and for the island. They are not waiting on a king. They are caring through love and action right now.

The Santa Rosa community is doing the same thing. I'm friends with the minister of the Unitarian Universalist church in Santa Rosa, and I've been watching on social media what that church is doing during the terrible fires in that city. The minister has helped share news about homes and families in trouble. The church, which is safe from fire, has been open every day for all people with community, music and food. People can go there for a simple meal and to care for one another. It's so simple, and there is a long way to go for that community, but they are showing up as leaders in a time of need.

Just as God called the ancient Israelites to be prophets, priests and kings, we are called today to be leaders in our communities. It will be tempting for us to resist the mantle of leadership. But our world needs leaders, now more than ever. There is no one here but us.

As priests, we will remember what is holy and keep ourselves aligned with our deepest values. We will not be distracted by tweets or online outrage. We will look for opportunities to live ethical lives, and we will take them amidst the storm of news reports and anxiety over world events. We will respond to tragedy with caring and compassion. We will make our communities places of respect and dignity.

As prophets, we will live and speak as though we are on the margins of our society. We will remember that in this community, and in our diverse identities, we bring the margins and the center together. We will find hope, and give hope to others, and not be dragged down by despair. We will have the strength to say what is right and to live our lives as though what is good is also possible.

As leaders, we will take responsibility for our own choices and the good that we can do even when the world seems in chaos. We will remember that we have more influence than we think. A peaceful home is made of a family working together at peace. A compassionate neighborhood is created out of caring neighbors. A city's policies are determined by those citizens who speak and those voters who show up.

We are like tuning forks, tuned to the holy, and it rings as loudly now as in times of old. We are called to lives of righteousness and caring, and we will not be distracted by a wicked king, or by our own despair. We are more powerful and more beloved than that. We can be leaders in our communities, engines of caring, capacitors of kindness, storehouses of justice. The Spirit moves in us and enlivens us and gives us the power to make change.

Amen.