

## Who are God's prophets in Lynchburg? How might we bend our ears toward them?

Dori Baker, August 21, 2016

Jeremiah is called at the age of 14 or 15. Hard to imagine? In the long career that lies ahead of him, with words and images he will weave a possibility that breaks out of the reality that exists around him. It is God's possibility, a hope toward which Israel is bent, but from which Israel inevitably, over time, strays again and again. (Sound familiar?)

In writing about the Prophets and their role in educating Protestants, Walter Brueggemann writes: "The prophets are not political scientists with blueprints for a social order. They are not crusaders for a cause. They are not ethical teachers. They are speakers who commit linguistic acts that assault the presumed world of the king, who expose the pretentiousness of the royal system, and who invite listening Israel to entertain new dimensions of social possibility, which they have never before considered.

The prophets — in Protestantism — have been misunderstood as social activists or reformers, Brueggemann says — but they have the more fundamental task of **NURTURING THE POETIC IMAGINATION.**

If Jeremiah, the 14 or 15 year old is among us today in LYN, what would he be, a sophomore at E.C. Glass or Heritage? Or a kid who's not in school? Close your eyes for a moment and imagine for a 15-year-old prophet. What would she look like? What color is his skin? What are her facial features? Is she straight? Transgendered? Black, white, Latino/a?

If we wanted to bend our ear toward God's prophets this morning, where would we go? Are they hear among us? Are they in our families? Our neighborhoods? Who is nurturing the poetic imagination? Who is pointing us toward God's in-breaking reality?

I know a woman in Houston who asked that question and further wondered: What does the church look like when people listen to the prophets, not the ones within our own walls, but the prophets arising in unlikely places?

I recently spent time with The Rev. Hannah Bonner, a white woman who ministers through a predominately African American church in downtown Houston.

When Hannah got to Houston two years ago, instead of wondering how to get young adults to start attending church, she started hanging out in the places young adults congregate. She asked:

- Where are young people speaking a word the church needs to hear?
- Where are they crying out about the pain of their lives and the systems they navigate?
- Where are they voicing the lament and the celebration of what it means to be young and alive in my city today?

These questions led her to the vibrant spoken word scene, where Hannah started listening. For those of you who don't know the term "spoken word" it is a form of poetry performed live, usually by memorization. It is an oral art that focuses on word play, intonation, and voice inflection. It is popular among young people in urban areas.

Hannah began befriending the spoken word artists whose social critique resounded with her theology. Over time, Hannah and the poets organized weekly small group meetings called "whispers" and monthly spoken word performances called "The Shout," which sometimes result in actions in the community, called "echoes."

The way Hannah tells it, spoken word poets in **The Shout** community — people with nicknames like Dream, Nyne, Corrina, and The Fluent One — are more than just poets, they are prophets—speaking out loud words that are meant to help us imagine a better world.

Their genre resembles the biblical prophets Jeremiah or Isaiah, whose oral performances were intended to reform the way God's people worshipped, treated one another, and created social structures that cared for the most vulnerable.

Frustrations surface in spoken word: stories of humans suffering in the face of poverty, racial profiling, discrimination, and other struggles emerge. Wearing her clergy collar to these performances and inviting her church members along, Hannah embodies a reminder that God stands with the community, feeling their anger in the midst of injustice. The church is not distant from those who suffer – indeed God is present in their midst.

Hannah's story strikes me as an innovative model of liberatory\* theology at work today. Relationships form slowly over meals, shared work, and play. When disruptions occur in the fabric of life, those sacred spaces become crucibles to plan actions of protest, hope, and healing. Listening leads to reflection, and action leads to more listening.

A disruption occurred in Hannah's community a year ago, July 13. On that day, Sandra Bland, an African-American woman and a friend of many of the Houston spoken word artists, died in her jail cell, apparently of suicide. Before the video showing the white police officer verbally and physically mistreating Sandra gained national attention, the Shout community and Hannah were on-site, organizing what turned out to be an 80-day protest at the Waller County Jail and ongoing advocacy for justice in the case.

A few months ago, the organization I work with coincidentally hosted a retreat just twenty miles away from that jail. I had invited Hannah to be a leader, but this was before I knew about The Shout, or her involvement with the Sandra Bland case.

Before heading to the airport, I stood with Hannah and a handful of my colleagues at a roadside memorial marking the place where Sandra was stopped for failure to use a turn signal. Hannah noted two new teddy bears and straightened an overturned vase of flowers. We sang "We Shall Not Be Moved."

I experienced then a moment's in-breaking, a glimpse into the very hard and necessary work the church must lead if we are to dismantle the ongoing effects of our nation's thick legacy of racial inequity. It happens like this: one young pastor leading by listening, one newborn community getting to know one another's lives and struggles, one vigil, one protest at a time—amplifying one another's voices and refusing to walk away from the extreme discrepancies faced by brothers and sisters of color. The takeaway for me is this: everywhere and everyday it is my work as a white Christian leader to find new ways to listen, befriend, and give my sustained attention to the experiences of brown and black people. Hannah and The Shout community provide a model I can learn from.

**So where are the poets, the prophets, in Lynchburg? How might we apply Hannah's model here? I've spent the past few months trying to find out.**

If this passage from Jeremiah is our guide, we would look to young people — perhaps to young people who are asserting their own worth, despite a world that says they have no worth.

We would look to young people who speak boldly, as if they are taking to heart these words, spoken by the creator of the universe: "Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you."

We would look to young people who seem to speak out of an inner wisdom telling them they have something important — even necessary — to say.

We would look to those who seem to be held by a deep awareness that they are, like Jeremiah, descended from a priestly line, a line that carries a connection to the holy in its DNA.

Although having great reason to be afraid, these prophets might wear a cloak of assuredness, you might call it Swag, that might grow out of having heard these words spoken over them, countless times, as they came of age: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you: I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Somewhat on accident, I meant a young African American man named Nicholas George last Valentine's Day. Nicholas is a graduate of Liberty University, but he doesn't adhere to all the beliefs of the religious right. Because I was then and am still, trying to expand my social network outside the realm of white worlds that come by nature, I Facebook friended Nicholas and began to learn more about his work.

He is a 20-something, father of two, working as a mental health counselor. A spoken word poet himself, he started hosting regular spoken word events called "The Listening" around Lynchburg a few years ago. I started showing up and inviting friends.

Last weekend, I hosted Nick and 20 of his friends for an evening of poetry and community building. We munched on popcorn and pretzels. Together, those gathered make up "Spencer's Vanguard" a group of artists who lean into the history of Anne Spencer, the famous Lynchburg native who was a Harlem Renaissance poet, teacher, librarian, and gardener.

Spencer's Vanguard has a vision: They hope to use the arts to advocate for serious issues that affect people on the margins. I heard them say they want "change the culture of performance art" so that it's not just for the sake of entertainment, but so that "young people will see us behind the mike and know, this joint saves lives. There is so much death, abuse. We've got to use this art to save lives." Through spoken word, music, dance, and other art forms, they want to reach out to middle and high school kids who so often turn to thoughts of suicide as an answer in the midst of a hard life.

One moment from that night, particularly, stands out to me.

Nick spoke his poem into the room. It was called "I" and it expressed the hope that his children would "walk in the conviction like the world already knows their

greatness.” It talked about loving his own black skin and teaching his daughter and son to love their black skin, too.

After he spoke it, a conversation followed about what it is like to leave your house when you are black in 2016. A young man wondered if the clock had been turned back fifty years. He said he never imagined that he would live with the fear that surrounds him today. And he asked: What can I do for our people? What can you do?

From my perspective as a white woman sitting on a couch, my legs curled up beneath me, I gave thanks that God is raising up — right here — a generation of prophets. And I gave thanks that God is putting me in a position to see them, get to know them, and be able to introduce them to my circle of influence.

They don’t have a blueprint for a new social order. They are not ethical teachers or crusaders for a cause..

But they are, as Brueggemann describes, “people tracing the impingement of God’s work and purpose in, with, and under their contemporary historical experience.”

They are, as Brueggemann describes, forming an alternative imagination — nurturing a poetic imagination.

Brueggemann says poetry has the time and the patience to pay attention to the textures and nuances of experience, to notice the rawness and terror, the emptiness and surprise which belong to historical experience.

I wonder if Hannah Bonner is really on to something — and I wonder what would happen if we bent our ears more often to the spoken word poets of Lynchburg.

Would that mean breaking some of the religious rules of our day? (For me it does, one of my strictest religious rules is — or at least was — to stay as far away as I can from identifying myself with “that kind of Christian” — the kind that comes to Lynchburg because of its largest university.)

Near the end of the Luke passage for today, Jesus breaks the religious rules.

He heals on the Sabbath.

The woman he heals has been bent over for 18 years. It’s an old and crippling wound, much like the old and crippling wound that is our nation’s racial legacy.

But this was no emergency! Couldn't Jesus have waited a day and avoided the controversy?

As the leader of the synagogue, it may have been easy to counsel someone else to be patient. It wasn't his back that was crippled or his bones that were brittle.

But Jesus ignored this fact and healed her anyway.

So we know there must be a secret theological statement hidden in the story. Otherwise it wouldn't have made it in. Indeed, the story must be saying something about Jesus — about the way he wears his identity and practices is authority — about the way the character of God is revealed in what Jesus does.

And for me, this is it.

The story of the crippled woman provides a glimpse of what God's reign will be like. Where Jesus is, the kingdom is, now. Where Jesus is, things begin to be made right. Where Jesus is, the world will be repaired.

In Richard Rohr's words, Once in a while, the True Self becomes radiant and highly visible in one lovely place or person.

The prophetic imagination — that long, sustaining thread weaving its way through the history of the people of Israel — begins to see its fulfillment in the person of Jesus.

When he's around, the longstanding suffering is attended to today, not ignored until tomorrow.

In the reign of God, there will be no blindness, no one broken or disfigured.

There will be no mass incarceration, no random shootings, no disfigured system which educates white children more effectively than it educates black children.

In the reign of God, there will be no people who are treated as if their lives don't matter; there will be no conflict between what is good for me and what is good for Mike Brown.

If this is the future God is preparing — if this is the realm the prophets ask us to imagine — how might we contribute to some manifestation of it here, where we find ourselves, now?

*\*Tending, or serving, to liberate*