



**Lawrence Park
Community Church**

United • Unorthodox • Unlimited

Responsible Prophets

Texts: Exodus 34: 29-35; Luke 9: 28-36

Preached February 14, 2010 by Alison L. Mock

Since the earthquakes devastated Haiti a month ago, people all over the world have leapt into action to help the survivors. The response has been overwhelmingly compassionate, almost without fail – but one notable exception came a few weeks ago from American Evangelist Pat Robertson. During a broadcast of his show, “The 700 Club”, Robertson named the citizens of Haiti as the architects of their own fate, calling them a nation “under Satan’s mercy” since they “made a deal with the Devil” two centuries ago. Haiti is not an exclusively Christian nation, you see – there are two national religions there, two deeply conflicting religions, Catholicism, and Voodooism. The high numbers of Voodooists, according to Robertson, confirm that the DEVIL IS AT WORK THERE, and those battered people, whose pictures fill our newspapers and permeate our thoughts, deserve everything they get.

This type of blame-the-victim judgement upon a suffering people is horrifying to us, and our temptation is to simply ignore it – but this is not an option. You see, Pat Robertson is offering himself as “the Christian voice”, proclaiming his version of truth in the face of this tragedy. In an uncomfortable sort of way, this makes him a prophet. That’s not a term we use often in our everyday life. What does it mean to be a prophet? Whose version of truth do we accept, or proclaim? Let’s consider those questions as we turn to our story, where we encounter another prophet we know well – the prophet Moses.

We meet Moses at the foot of Mount Sinai, stone tablets in hand, ready to give God’s commandments to his people in the desert. He steps forward to address them – and something happens. His friends see him – and they recoil in horror. Some do not even recognize him. They turn away, unable to even look at his face. What has happened? Why are they acting this way? The story tells us that Moses has spent 40 days and 40 nights in conversation with God, receiving the law. Though he does not realize it, he has been physically changed by this encounter. Moses’ face is shining and radiant – not the glow of beauty, but a blinding radiance, protruding from his face like the rays of harsh, intense sunlight. The people cannot help but turn away – they cannot look at him.

Moses was a prophet, and in Biblical times, that meant that he had a special relationship with God. He went up the mountain to receive the Word and then brought that message down to the Hebrews. Remember that ancient, vertical understanding of the world – God is up there, and the people are below. The prophet has to go “up” to get close to God, which is the reason this conversation takes place atop a mountain. But even with this special relationship, these extra privileges, Moses was never allowed to see God face-to-face, he couldn’t get that close. Looking into the face of God was strictly forbidden under Hebrew Law – as was speaking God’s name. But in going up the mountain, he gets closer to God than most people are able to do, and that encounter is so intense that it effects a profound, visible transformation. Something of God, some dimension of the sacred, is now being reflected in the face of Moses himself. But since the Hebrews cannot look at the face of God, they cannot look at the transfigured Moses. The man who was their companion, the man who is leading them through the desert, the one in whom they put their trust – is now different to them.

With a little persuading, Moses' friends face him long enough to hear the commandments. But when he is finished, he covers his face with a veil, to avoid their horrified stares. From that moment on, he keeps his face covered up at all times, except when he goes up to speak with God. This transfiguration of Moses changes the dynamic completely. It separates Moses from his people, alienating him in a totally irreversible way. He can never walk normally among them again. He is God's prophet, giving God's word, and now he even reflects a part of God's face. God has transformed Moses, and nothing is ever the same.

As moderate, liberal Christians today, we are often tempted to hide our own faces behind veils. Very few of us would claim Pat Robertson as our spokesperson. In fact, in light of his embarrassing judgement on Haiti, it is tempting for us to simply keep our Christianity a secret, lest others think that we share his views. It is difficult for us to live as "out of the closet" Christians, as society increasingly turns away from organized religion, and right-wing evangelical fundamentalism dominates the media. It seems as though the Pat Robertsons form the majority. And we are afraid that if we speak with a Christian voice, we may be met with the same stares of horror that so troubled Moses. It is understandable that we are hesitant. But we sometimes forget that we are called to be prophets, just as Moses was a prophet to his people. We are called to bring our Christian voice to our world. The words of our commission are clear – we are the hands and feet of Christ. Christ has no body now but ours. This means that we have a message to bring - a counter-cultural message of grace, forgiveness, honouring creation, rejecting greed, protesting unjust systems, helping those in need.

Most of us have some trouble taking up this role and living it out in our lives, day after day, decision after decision. Our message is not one that is heard easily, but this is to be expected – prophetic voices are rarely loved by everybody. So what happens when we take our Christian voice, our prophetic voice, into the places of our lives – into our business negotiations, in the stands at the hockey arena, in our political discussions? What happens we dare to let something of the sacred within us become visible to others? We know there will be people that do not want to hear it, people who do not want to look at us. Maybe it's because our Christian voice will cause a rift between us and our friends. Maybe it's because our Christian voice will jeopardize our next big deal. Or maybe it's just that we don't want people to think that we're weird.

On Friday, just as I was adding the finishing touches to this sermon, a message popped up on my Facebook page. An old classmate of mine, now a grad student at U of T, posted the following Status Update: "Today, someone asked me to join the Campus Bible Study Group. Honestly, do I look like I need saving, or that I'm into that weird stuff?" And somehow, I couldn't quite find the courage to post a reply, to defend the faith, to tell her that the Christianity that I hold near and dear is really not "weird stuff." This is exactly the problem, isn't it? We're afraid our Christian voice – however moderate, however progressive – will alienate us, and we are afraid to be alienated. We don't want there to be a veil between us and our friends. This is scary stuff. Choosing to reflect the sacred in our secular world does change things. It changes the nature of our relationships, maybe even threatens them. And nothing is ever quite as simple going forward.

I guess we could argue that Moses had no choice in the matter. The story tells us that he was permanently, unmistakably, physically changed by God – by the very nature of his relationship with God. He couldn't reverse that, or do anything about it. But, even with this reality, Moses did have a choice. He could have chosen to run. He could have abandoned his people. Remember that he didn't really want this job to begin with, he argued with the burning bush in the first place. And now – who could blame him for not wanting to live as an outcast?

Who would want to accept the reality that his friends will never be comfortable around him again? Who wants to live knowing that they will never be the same as everyone else? Moses could have handed the reigns over to Aaron, and left his people in the desert, to their own devices. But he didn't. He covered up his face with the veil, and in this action, he allowed himself the possibility of continuing to live among them, and serving them as their leader. Even though this new relationship with God had changed in its intensity, and its power, he chose to continue God's work, moving courageously on as the prophet to his people. The veil that Moses put over his face acts as a symbol of this courage. It serves as a visual reminder of the strength of his character, of the magnitude of his relationship with God, and of the endurance of the covenant between God and the people, between God and ourselves.

We don't bear the burden of a being physically transfigured by God. So, in one sense, we do have a choice. We can cover our faith with a veil, and never let our call to be Christian be heard in the world around us. We can reject our role as prophets and "just keep quiet." But though this may seem on the surface to be the easier answer, we do ourselves no favours by hiding. If we don't speak up against Pat Robertson's brand of "Christian" judgement, then we allow ourselves to be tarred with exactly his brush. If we allow his voice, and others like him, to be the only voices of Christianity that are heard, then we allow them to claim the definition of what it means to be Christian. We allow him to speak for us. Keeping silent is not the answer. We can speak up. We can offer an alternative. We can be the voice that speaks well of Christian action in the world.

What shall we say to Pat Robertson? Well, we can begin with the message that there is hope for Haiti. Billions of dollars have poured in from all over the world, millions from Canada alone, from people, just like you, who have acted in unquestioning generosity and grace. Doctors, aid workers, and missionaries of many faiths have rushed to the country to help anyone in need. There is no religious discrimination, no judgement or blame behind these gifts of money and time, only the deep desire to help things to get better. Even amongst the Haitians themselves, there are emerging signs of healing. On Friday, the country marked a day of national mourning, and part of the ceremonies included a multi-faith prayer service. Despite deep historical conflict and animosity between Haiti's Christian and Voodoo citizens, the chief priests of both religions came together to officiate. A tiny step, perhaps, but a deeply prophetic one. These prophets offer the world a message, not of blame and exclusion, but rather compassion and grace. These are the prophets from whom take our cue.

But there is something else. Today is Transfiguration Sunday. Today we remember the powerful, transforming action of God in the stories of our scriptures – in the story of Moses, and generations later, a parallel transformation, also atop a mountain – the transfiguration of Jesus. Shortly after that, there followed the most stunning transformation of all – the transformation of the resurrection. Both Moses and Jesus physically stand out as exceptional examples – they were leaders to be noticed, teachers among their people, prophets of God. But we are not exempt from this transformation. God transforms Moses, God transforms Jesus, and God transforms us. God calls us to be Christians in this world, and we cannot deny it. God is a part of us, and the fact that we do not bear a physical mark of this is utterly beside the point. The sacred is within us, whether we like it or not, and the only thing we get to choose is how we reflect that to the world. We can let Pat Robertson have the final say, or - we can find the courage to let light come through the veil, allow our faces to shine, and become responsible prophets – living as the hands, feet, and voice of Jesus Christ. May it be so.