

It may well be that one of the major tasks of the church, and major challenges to the church, is to welcome prophets. The work of the prophet is twofold: first, to confront injustice and, second, to inspire hope of a larger freedom.

Something new happened in history with the Exodus and the Moses movement. On the one hand, Moses intended the dismantling of the oppressive empire of Pharaoh; and on the other hand, the formation of a new community of justice and compassion, protecting the rights of the least powerful and preserving freedom for all.

The Moses movement was too radical for Israel. After the initial euphoria of liberation, the obligations and responsibilities of freedom became too burdensome. The people wanted to be like other nations; they clamored for a king to rule over them.

Samuel warns the people a king will conscript their sons for war and their daughters for cooks and bakers. A king will confiscate the best vineyards and orchards, tax their labor and property, and they will become his slaves.

The people respond, "A king there shall be over us! And we too shall be like all the nations and our king shall rule us and fight our battles." Samuel, with God's consent, relented and anointed a king. The old history of Pharaoh continued in the monarchy of Israel.

The prophets of Israel persisted, however, pursuing the freedom movement of Moses in the face of royal reality. Jeremiah radically criticized royal consciousness. Jeremiah wasn't received warmly, but was dumped into a pit and left to die.

Jesus practiced in most radical form the main elements of prophetic ministry and imagination. He criticized religious and political leaders who served their own interests over the well-being of the poor and he empowered his followers to embrace a vision of freedom in the commonwealth of God. Jesus was not warmly received by the religious or political establishment.

We are at a moment of cultural and spiritual dismantling, writes Peter Choi, executive director of the Center for Faith and Justice. In a time of far-reaching social upheaval many feel "homeless," culturally and spiritually. The way forward appears so daunting and bewildering that some prefer a "king" to the honesty, courage, and commitment required to preserve freedom.

As Isaiah knew, there are times when we soar on wings like eagles and times when we are called to run without growing weary, to walk without losing heart. Choi believes we are in a time when even walking is challenging; we are closer to stumbling in the dark.

To find our way, he believes, we need to learn five things. First, we need to understand more deeply the histories of empire, race, and slavery. We need an honest historical reckoning with the past in order to find our way into a more hopeful future.

Second, we need to see more clearly the dangers of theological convictions driving political agendas. True justice protects and affirms the dignity of every human being. Solidarity not judgement, inclusion not exclusion paves the way forward. Emphasizing the primacy of loving ourselves and each other in our moral complexity enlarges hope for all.

Third, just as American Christians once killed each other over racial slavery, insisting they had the Bible on their side, so scriptural arguments have potential to spill over into violence today. We need to understand that certitude is not faith and dogmatic judgments on moral issues is not love. Faith does not lead us into war—one certainty pitted against another certainty—but into deeper mystery.

Fourth, we are being called to move from assumptions of superiority towards mutuality. Religious, cultural, national, and racial notions of supremacy threaten the common good and leave us lonely and fear-filled. Embracing environmentally sustainable and socially equitable practices yields greater abundance and a more joy-filled future.

Finally, exalted rhetoric is not as persuasive as sacrificial service. When poet and playwright Oscar Wilde was sent to prison in 1895, it was the ultimate humiliation for him. In his day, he was a real celebrity, but all that evaporated once he was convicted.

Whenever the prison authorities moved him in public, he was spat at and jeered. On one occasion, when the crowd was particularly hostile, a friend of Wilde's appeared and made a simple gesture of friendship and respect and silenced the crowd.

What was that simple gesture? As Wilde passed by, handcuffed and looking at the ground, the man simply raised his hat to him, the smallest of good deeds.

Later, Wilde wrote, "The memory of that lowly silent act of love has unsealed for me all the wells of pity, made the desert bloom like a rose, and brought me out of the bitterness of lonely exile into harmony with the wounded, broken and great heart of the world."

The cup of cold water, the smallest of good deeds, strengthens the weary to walk on without losing heart.