

After the Inauguration©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Unlike Yertle and Mack and all of the other characters in our story today, we don't live in a turtle pond on the island of Sala-ma-Sond. Most of us don't think of ourselves as living on an island. I find it to be an interesting coincidence however, that many of the Indigenous People refer to this land as Turtle Island. The early settlers who came to this continent from Europe didn't adopt the idea of this being called Turtle Island. There was much that the white settlers didn't accept or adopt from the Native Peoples. But there was one thing the early founders of our country recognized as worthy of significant respect and admiration. That was a form of government practiced by several tribes in what is now New York state. This group of tribes was known as the Iroquois Confederacy and it is considered to be the oldest living participatory democracy on Earth. We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the Indigenous People of this land. It is my hope that we will someday properly and adequately pay that debt. That very likely will be the topic for a future sermon.

Today however, I want to focus on an issue that is of concern to a great many people in this country, including those of indigenous ancestry. That is the current state of our political system. Unlike the situation on Sala-ma-Sond, our country, at least the last I checked, isn't ruled by a king. We are a democracy. A democracy based on the model of the Iroquois Confederacy. Yet while this country is a democracy, I am very concerned about the direction I see our political system headed. From conversations I have had with a good number of you, I know I am not alone in my concern.

Since I am addressing matters involving our political system and people in that system, I think it is both appropriate and important to mention that UUFB has adopted a "Statement on Political Speech." This Statement was created to insure that we abide by the laws of our country and the rules established by the Internal Revenue Service. The IRS bans all tax exempt churches, which is what we are, from engaging in any action that it identifies as "political campaign intervention." I intend here today to abide by those rules and to honor the intent of the UUFB Statement on Political Speech. What I have to say will not involve intervening in any political campaign. The election is over.

Now that the election and the inauguration are behind us, I intend to speak to matters of concern which involve the stated beliefs, practices, and/or policies of current political office holders. And not only the political office holders but also the people that are being chosen for jobs that will influence and implement policies. The stated beliefs, practices and policies of these leaders will impact people not just in this country but people around the world. I cannot, in good conscience, remain silent about my concerns. I don't remain silent when I hear or see someone disparaging another because of their race or nationality. I don't remain silent when I hear someone ridiculing another for their looks or their mental and emotional challenges. I don't remain silent when someone brags about assaulting women and getting away with it. And I won't remain silent about politicians who speak in ways that reject common decency or act in ways that defy the laws of our land. I will speak out against behavior I believe is immoral or illegal. I will speak out whether the behaviors are that of a common person, an

employee of our government, or a political office holder. To do otherwise would compromise my integrity as well as my credibility as a religious leader.

With that stated upfront, I return now to our reading this morning. As we heard there, I believe “This is a time for prophets.” Now that the inauguration is over I feel compelled to heed Dan McKanan’s call to speak loudly and clearly. I have never before considered myself a prophet, but today I believe I must take up that mantle. And like prophets both ancient and modern, I look to the values, teachings and principles of my faith to speak truth to power. The Hebrew Bible tells us that speaking truth to power was what the prophets Isaiah and Amos did over two thousand years ago. Martin Luther King, Jr. based his call for an end to segregation and discrimination on the teachings and values of his Christian faith. So where do I look for my grounding, for my foundation? I turn to our Seven Principles and Six Sources.

Many of you are familiar with them. They are printed in your Order of Service today and every Sunday that we hold worship. Take a moment to find them now and read them to yourself. Just last month we held a special multigenerational service that focused entirely on the Seven Principles. Yet in spite of the importance these Principles and Sources hold for me, I must admit that I don’t have all of them memorized as any respectable prophet of the past would certainly have done. While I don’t have them memorized they are what I refer to and what I rely on in challenging situations or uncertain times. And when I turn to them and speak of them clearly and directly I find that they make a significant difference in my interactions with others.

An interaction I had with a fellow just a few months ago may give you a sense of what I am referring to. A few weeks before the election a man who was running for State office came knocking on my door. Many of you likely had similar knocks on your door. He introduced himself and quickly went into his prepared and well practiced presentation. He began with the following question. “What do you believe is the most important issue in the upcoming election?” Sound familiar? I didn’t have a well prepared and practiced answer to give him. And I guess I didn’t respond fast enough for the fellow. After just a few seconds he began providing me with possible answers. Answers that he claimed had been given by people living nearby. The list included issues such as jobs, taxes, gridlock in government, and threats to freedom. I am sure he could have gone on for some time. After a few moments though, I realized what, for me, was the most important issue in the election. An issue that continues to be at or near the top of my list still today. With a confident and clear voice I stated, “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” You may have noticed that this is the first of our Seven Principles. What happened next surprised me. In response to my reply the political candidate fell silent. Imagine that for just a moment, a person running for State office being made speechless by a such a simple statement. He didn’t know how to respond. I say that with confidence because instead of the political sales pitch continuing the person said “Thank you, I hope you have a nice day.” Then he turned his back and walked away.

Having people turn their backs and walk away is something prophets experience frequently. They experience it frequently until their message begins to take hold with the people. They experience it frequently until their message begins to threaten the practices and structures that oppress and do harm. Returning again to our reading, I

agree that; “This is a time for prophets.” I cannot and will not remain silent when people are being mistreated or ignored.

But I am just one person, a single voice. I could feel powerless or discouraged as a single voice, but I don't. Instead, I have hope because I recall the next line in our reading. “In times like these, prophets must speak loudly, clearly, and with many voices.” I have hope because yesterday I had the opportunity to gather in Helena with a throng of prophets, some of whom are in this room today. It was a throng of prophets who were speaking loudly, clearly and with many voices. Those prophets were making it clear that women are not second-class citizens. They were making it clear that women are not simply servants. They were making it clear that women are not subjects of the “ruling” class. And they were making it clear that women are not objects. They were making it clear that the worth and dignity of all people need to be acknowledged and respected. I feel honored and privileged to have stood with, and spoken out on behalf of, those who have had their rights denied or their personhood denigrated.

I will be heading to Helena again tomorrow. This time as part of the Montana Association of Christians Day at the Legislature 2017. I will join with other people of faith in speaking with our elected leaders about issues such as providing adequate support and protection for children and strengthening families. About showing hospitality toward vetted and documented immigrants. About providing humane treatment for all immigrants. About abolishing the death penalty. And about providing justice, equity and compassion in human relations through establishing laws that respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

In the days ahead I am certain that there will be ample opportunity for prophets to speak up, to stand up. I want to encourage each of you, in the days ahead to look for such opportunities—opportunities to let your prophetic voice be heard. There are numerous ways to make your prophetic voice ring out. One way is for each of us to speak up in situations where the values embedded in our Principles are being ignored or violated. You might pick one Principle a day or one a week and watch for opportunities to speak about it to another or practice it with someone you encounter. Another possibility would be for us to speak on an issue of importance with one voice. We could do this through making a congregational public statement. We have such an opportunity right now. Earlier this week the UUA and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee jointly came out with a “Declaration of Conscience.” Our Board President, Peg Wherry, sent this out on the listserv on Wednesday. Any individual who would care to can become a signatory to this document. I put my signature to it within minutes of receiving the announcement. But we could also, as an entire congregation, make the choice to sign on as the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman. If you think this congregation should speak as one voice in support of this “Declaration of Conscience,” I encourage you to talk to a Board member.

As you have heard a number of times this morning; “This is a time for prophets... In times like these, prophets must speak loudly, clearly, and with many voices....” As individuals and as a congregation, I encourage, no, I beseech us, to make the choice, again and again, to be the prophets that this time so desperately needs.

May it be so.