

PROPHETS IN THE MAKING

Welcome to summer! Time for picnics at the beach, lemonade on the patio and sailing on the sound. It's also the time for vacations and road trips, and all across the country parents are hearing those four cherished words of American life: "Are we there yet?"

Despite iPods and in car DVD players, many folks still play games to help pass the time on a road trip.

Whenever my wife Linda and I take a lengthy drive we play the License Plate Game. The object of the game is to spot as many different license plates as you can along the way. It's always easy to get plates from places like New York and Maryland, but states out West are often really a challenge. We've often gotten every state but Wyoming, Alaska, Hawaii, and the toughest one of all, North Dakota. Larry Aasen will tell you it really is out there somewhere on the plains, but you can't prove it by the license plates on our highways!

Usually one of the hardest states to spot is New Mexico. Not because of the plate itself, the bright yellow background makes it stand out on any highway! But rather, because there are so few of them in our neck of the woods. New Mexico really is a far off place. It's also a little far out!

A bit over a week ago I was in New Mexico with fifteen teenagers and two other adults from our church. We were there to work and to learn about a different part of our world.

Those New Mexican license plates refer to the state as "The Land of Enchantment". And so it is. The desert, the magnificent mountains and the wide blue sky, all combine to create a place that feels rather mystical—like it was under a spell!

We discovered that all sorts of religious and spiritually-minded folks have made New Mexico their home. We learned about Native American spirituality at the 900 year old pueblo in Taos. We visited a Hindu Ashram. We drove by a Buddhist temple. We toured three different Catholic Churches dating back hundreds of years.

Perhaps the most telling reminder of the high level of interest in matters of the spirit was the fact that each day the local NPR affiliate broadcast a five-minute astrological forecast. Geminis and Capricorns alike could learn all about what the stars predicate would happen in the day ahead.

Some people call that kind of forecasting, that kind of prognostication, prophecy. But that is not the biblical understanding of prophecy. For the authors of scripture a prophet is a man, woman, or even a child, who tells the truth about the human condition. A prophet is one who declares God's love and concern for all people, and who calls on us to act in accordance

with that love. As Abraham Heschel writes: “It is God’s concern for [humanity] that is at the root of the prophet’s work to save the people.” (*The Prophets*, II: 263)

Astrological forecasts notwithstanding, we did meet several prophets on our trip to New Mexico. Let me tell you about two of them.

Back in the eighties, Bea Nevares was a proud mother of three children, including a son who was destined to be a priest. She was also a successful business woman. She owned a clothing store, and did well selling brand name fashions. Over time she realized that some people came in her store read a few price tags, and then left. And others, in a manner of speaking, just pressed their noses against the windows, but never came in at all. While she was outfitting those who already had more than enough, she realized others were going without even the basics.

Bea had been brought up by her parents and her church to see the importance of sharing in God’s concern for the poor, and gradually she became convinced that she needed to act on that concern. And so she left her business behind, and in 1989, began an outreach program in one of Santa Fe’s poorest neighborhoods. She called it *Bienvenidos*, Spanish for

Many folks have heard Bea’s invitation. Individuals, churches and even corporations have responded to her prophetic pleas, and today some 1800 families are served by her program. Many are single parent households, and what they earn just doesn’t stretch far enough to meet basic needs. Some are unemployed, and may have no income at all. The twice monthly boxes of food—filled with rice, beans, powdered milk, canned vegetables and other items, often make the difference between eating or not. And the clothing corner at the food pantry provides access to simple recycled clothing at no cost to the recipients. *Bienvenidos* serves 60-100 bag lunches to homeless folks four times a week, and hot meals on the weekends in a local park.

All because of a short, sixty-nine year old prophet named Bea who tells the truth about the human condition.

We also met an incredible priest named Casimiro Roca.

Father Roca was raised in Spain by very poor, but very devout parents. His family was greatly impacted by the Spanish Civil War. His only two brothers were both killed because of their Catholicism.

But that didn’t stop Father Roca from studying for the priesthood. When as a young boy he said he wanted to go to seminary as a young boy, his parents bravely consented, despite his brothers’ deaths.

During World War II he was separated from his family for several years. Then in 1950, after they had been reunited, his father was caught in a fire and severely burned. He died forty days later.

The following year Father Roca himself fell severely ill. One of his doctors told him that in order to survive he would have to start over. “You must go someplace you have never been, among people you do not know, and work very hard.” (Quoted at www.holychimayo.us)

In time he came to El Potrero, a struggling little village in the mountains of Northern New Mexico. There he discovered an old shrine, *Santuario de Chimayo*, which was falling into ruins—and villagers who were barely scraping by.

The shrine itself had been built to commemorate a miracle, and to safeguard the rich soil in that spot which was believed to have healing powers. It was called the Lourdes of the New World. A few families made pilgrimage to the site once a year, but the special place was largely forgotten and seemed doomed.

Father Roca though was determined. And together with the villagers they shored up the shrine and built up the village. He lovingly showed me the beautiful hand carved doors made in 1812 that they had rescued. It has since been named a National Historic Landmark. And today, at 92, the four-foot, ten- Spanish priest, still presides over daily mass, and pastors the people of Chimayo. And thousands flock to the shrine each year, where they find renewed hope and healing. The walls are lined with crutches that have been cast aside, pictures of those who have found healing, and letters bearing testimony to the wonders of the shrine.

All because a short and suffering priest spoke up when saw a people and a place that had been ignored and cast aside; all because of a prophet named Casimiro Roca.

But what about the day Father Roca passes on to meet his maker? What happens to Chimayo then? And what about Bea’s good work at Bienvenidos?

I don’t know the specific answer to either of those questions—but I do know our scripture lesson from I Kings provides us with a general answer to the dilemma. For in conveying the story of the Prophet Elijah’s passing on his mantle to the young man Elisha, the author reminds us that while it is important to listen to the prophets in our midst—the Elijahs, the Bea Nevares, the Father Rocas—there must always be prophets in the making. There must always be Elishas, those we identify who can carry on the holy work of justice and mercy. And the story also reminds us they don’t just spring up out of nowhere. Elisha had traveled with Elijah for years. He had seen the older man at work. He had witnessed his bravery as he spoke out against injustice. He had seen him heal the sick and feed the poor. Elisha had been apprenticed to one of the best. He had been a prophet in the making, long before he took up Elijah’s mantle.

That, of course, is precisely why we went to Santa Fe in the first place. That is precisely why most of our congregations support similar mission trips. Yes, the kids and adults all work hard. Yes, we do make a real difference in the lives of those with whom we work. But truth be told, the main reason we go is to train up our young people to be prophets.

The young men and women who went on our trip got to meet Father Roca. They even received a blessing from him. They got to work alongside Bea. They got to hear their stories—and witness their work. They also got to work with Habitat for Humanity, and see how the prophetic voice of Habitat’s founder, Millard Fuller, is transforming the lives of real people. They got to see, as one of the kids put it, “retired old guys” who give every day of the week to working for Habitat as volunteers. They got to meet real men, women and children who will now have safe and secure shelter. And they got to work in a Boys and Girls Club that resulted from the prophetic words and actions of people who knew their gang-ridden and drug-infested barrio, one of the worst neighborhoods in Santa Fe, could become a safe haven for children if adults rose to the challenge.

By being exposed to these prophets of New Mexico, our teenagers learned much about what it means to proclaim and act on God’s love and concern for all people. They learned what it means to speak out on behalf of the oppressed, the forgotten, the downtrodden. They learned what it takes to be a prophet.

Before we left on our trip one of our parishioners made a large sign that stood on the front lawn at Saugatuck. “Saugatuck Youth Mission Trip,” it read. Then, quoting from our congregational vision statement, it said, “Learning to Love and Serve, God and Neighbor.” And so we did. We learned much about both those things. But the sign could have read, just as accurately, “Saugatuck Youth Mission Trip: Prophets in the Making.” For so they were—and so they are. Prophets in the making.

A recent article in *The Christian Century* wisely observed, “It takes a village to raise a child, but it takes a church to raise a teenager.” (Chanon Ross, “Cultivating Audacity,” *The Christian Century*, 6-26-07, 11) Even more so, it takes a church to raise a prophet.

On the last night of our trip, as we all gathered to share communion, to witness a beautiful sunset, and to share our thoughts about the week, I asked the kids “What have you learned about your self on this trip?” Their answers were varied—many of them rather profound. One of the kids who had helped make sandwiches at Bea’s food pantry said “I learned how much I have; I learned I need to be more grateful—and I need to be willing to share.” Another of the kids said, “I learned I want to do things like this the rest of my life.”

Truly, they are prophets in the making. Might we who are in the older generations of the church never forget our responsibility to prepare the young people in our midst for that inevitable day when, like Elijah, we too will pass on the mantle.

Amen
John H. Danner