

When Prophets Preach

Reviewed by Joseph S. Harvard III
Durham, North Carolina

Jonathan C. Augustine, *When Prophets Preach: Leadership and the Politics of the Pulpit* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, Fortress Press, 2023)

One of the great joys in life is introducing good friends to other good friends. The *Journal for Preachers* has been a treasured friend since its inception. Now, it is my pleasure to introduce you as readers of the *JP* to a new friend who has much to offer. The form of this introduction is a review of an extraordinary book, *When Prophets Preach*. The author, Pastor Jonathan (Jay) Augustine, arrived in Durham, North Carolina, in 2019 from New Orleans where he had been pastor of the Historic St. Charles AME congregation to become pastor of another historic congregation, St. Joseph AME. It has been my privilege to be closely connected to St. Joseph for over the thirty-three years of my ministry in Durham. We worshipped together and worked to build what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called a Beloved Community. It was soon obvious that Pastor Jay had unique gifts and a passion for social justice.

We are living in perilous times when everything seems up for grabs, and the world order is in peril, along with congregations and our common life. I often wonder if the center will hold. In his book on prophetic preaching, the author throws out a lifeline that offers hope and a challenge.

As a pastor on my route to the church I served for years, I drove past a small African American church that had a marquee which asked: “Who Needs A Word From The Lord?” followed by a scripture passage. One day I realized the marquee was speaking to me and to the world we live in. We are standing in the need of a Word from the Lord.

Prophetic preaching, according to Jay Augustine, listens, hears, and delivers the Word of the Lord! For him prophetic preaching emerges from Scripture. Scripture critiques our lives and world, calling for us to face the divide between God’s truth and justice and the status quo which promotes and supports systematic injustice. We are called to dare to proclaim God’s vision for peace with justice for all. The book is remarkable because it argues that the call for social justice is not an addendum to the Gospel, but it is central to the biblical witness and the teaching of Jesus: “Christianity compels political engagement in responding to oppressive social conditions” (page 20).

In these perilous days when everything we value, the climate, democracy, truth, and our religious institutions are under attack, Is there a Word from the Lord? At a time when the identity of what “Christian” means and what the Church of Jesus Christ stands for is uncertain, this book lifts up a vision for such a time as this. Au-

gustine calls on pastors and congregations to engage in the ancient tradition of the Judeo-Christian community of prophetic preaching and practicing what we preach. His proposal that we answer the call to seek justice by addressing issues of social justice from the pulpit and in our communal life is deeply rooted in Scripture. This is almost always political which some argue is “mixing religion with politics.”

Here is the author’s answer:

“The word ‘politics’ as translated from Greek, simply means ‘affairs of the cities.’ Consequently, when the church ‘gets political,’ it addresses matters of the state that morally compels its active engagement and prophetic resistance. Indeed, the Bible is replete with examples of prophetic leaders who get political because their faith compels responses to social injustices” (page 19).

Examples he offers include Amos crying out for justice (Amos 5: 4, 24) and Paul calling for gender and ethnic equality (Galatians 3:28). John is political writing from prison on Patmos (Revelations 1: 9). Then there is Jesus calling for release of the captives (Luke 4:18), and those three Hebrew boys, Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego engaging in civil disobedience (Daniel 3). And the list could go on and on.

Let me be honest here. Growing up I did not read or hear the Bible read in this way which sees the struggle for social justice as crucial. I was raised in a White Southern Presbyterian Church where social justice was not on the agenda, and frankly, it was scary to those of us who lived privileged lives. I am deeply grateful to my seminary professors and my Black colleagues like Jay Augustine, James Forbes, and Martin Luther King Jr., and many others who have opened my eyes to the centrality of the call for social justice.

The argument in this book is that even though prophetic preaching can be uncomfortable and met with resistance, it is crucial at this time. If the church is to have integrity and relevance in these days that cry out for a Word from the Lord, it is important that the church speak with a prophetic voice, a voice that addresses the lies, injustice, and hateful speech that leads to violence. Augustine believes a truth-telling church will give hope and encouragement to those perplexed by the current state of affairs.

Pastor Augustine also believes prophetic preaching is not a solo activity. He writes about the importance of building the support and commitment in a congregation of lay people who grasp the biblical vision for social justice and are willing to work to make it a reality. He describes how that has happened in the congregation he leads, and it has been so encouraging for me to watch it happen.

One of the dangers that is addressed in the book is Christian nationalism. The grasp of how this powerful force in our society, fueled by the MAGA’s regressive politics, threatens the message of the Gospel is insightful and serves as a helpful warning.

Another strong point in the book is the call for reconciliation and reparations. He draws on Paul’s exhortation to us as those who have been reconciled to God through

Christ to engage in a ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:17-19). Reconciliation is hard work because it means repairing broken relationships. Repentance and forgiveness are essential. Augustine also explores in a helpful way the issue of reparation, what it requires to repair a relationship! As a biblical example he offers the passage where “Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord: ‘if I have defrauded anyone, I will pay back four times as much’” (Luke 19:8).

The author’s call for reconciliation is reflected in these words from the Belhar Confession: “We believe that God has entrusted to the Church the message of reconciliation, and that the Church is called to proclaim and embody this reconciliation; to be peacemakers; to believe and to witness that God conquers all powers of sin and death, of hate and bitterness, and enmity, through his life-giving Word and Spirit.” How about a bowl of gumbo? Jay Augustine is from New Orleans and loves gumbo. He has a remarkable analysis of how the melting pot theory is inadequate to honor the unique gifts of people from different backgrounds. You will appreciate his description of how the composition of gumbo is a good analogy for honoring our diversity. Maybe this will whet your appetite for some gumbo and for a Beloved Community! I recommend this book because I believe it provides insight and a challenge to a way forward in these times when there is so much confusion and uncertainty.

The book also contains a couple of huge bonuses. The Foreword is written by the Reverend William J. Barber II, and the Afterword is by the Reverend William H. Willimon. Both of their messages which endorse the book are insightful and inspiring. Barber and Willimon are both mentors of the author. Jonathan Augustine travels in good company, and I invite you to join him.