

LATE PROPHETS SPEAK

II. JOHN HAYNES HOLMES (1879-1964)

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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One Monday morning many years ago, a fourth grade teacher asked her class who they thought was the greatest American.

A boy shot up his hand and declaimed, "George Washington!"

Following a reverent pause another voice called out, "Abraham Lincoln."

That seemed to exhaust the usual repertory of top rank American heroes. After all, whoever saw Franklin Pierce and Warren Gamaliel Harding flanking the flag in a school auditorium? But suddenly way back in the corner a boy leaped to his feet and cried: "Thomas Paine!"

"Who?" the teacher asked.

"Thomas Paine!"

What strange new revelation was this? For the next two weeks a curious buzz arose among the faculty every time that boy walked down the corridor.

Thirty hours earlier that boy had never heard of Tom Paine. But on the preceding Sunday morning he had come to my church and there he heard me speak of that early American radical who was roundly condemned as an atheist in so many pulpits in days gone by. I doubt that even after my sermon the boy understood why Tom Paine was important. But that he was important came through powerfully. When I heard this story later I was amused. I must say that I don't think there were many preachers in America who could speak over an hour on Thomas Paine to the utter fascination of a nine-year-old boy in corduroy knickers.

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Though I was born in Philadelphia and centered my career in the city of New York, no one who ever knew me thought of me otherwise than as a classic Bostonian. The Holmes arrived at Plymouth right after the Pilgrims and settled at Duxbury. My mother's family, the Haynes, were in Boston by 1635. I grew up in the Boston suburb of Malden, was educated at Harvard, and for many years I preached once a month at the Community Church in Boston, which I helped to found. In times of crisis I retreated to New England like Elijah to the wilderness. It was out of those quiet vigils at my summer cottage on the coast of Maine that I found the word to proclaim amid the tumult of the nation's largest city. To the very end I was, in the words of my biographer, Carl Voss, "The last Puritan," committed to a stern code of personal morality, dedicated to the vision of a new and better society, "convinced that.....men are made for destinies higher than those upon this earth."

My father was a wholesale furniture dealer who went bankrupt during my boyhood. My mother constantly nagged him both because of his bad grammar and his poor earnings. He took refuge in books, and it was from him that I first learned to respect Thomas Paine. It was from my grandfather Haynes that I heard of the man who I tried to emulate throughout my ministry, the great Unitarian preacher and abolitionist, Theodore Parker. This heroic

figure out of the past "taught me the real meaning of religion as an inward experience of God which expressed itself outwardly not merely in prayer and praise, but in a passion for righteousness, and a ceaseless labor for the weak, helpless and downtrodden among men."

Had it not been for the good offices of a high school teacher, I would have continued in the commercial course and gone into my grandfather's music publishing business. But the teacher persuaded my parents that I should prepare for Harvard. Entering Harvard on a scholarship, I earned my B.A. summa cum laude and then went on to the Divinity School.

Upon graduation I married a girl from Brooklyn and became minister of the Third Unitarian Society in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Years later, after reading some of our modern authors, I wrote some satirical lines which have found their way into Bartlett's Quotations.

"Come, physicians of the soul,
Tell me my ill!
I've been married eighteen years
And still adore my wife.
I have no hunger for other women,
I am content to be faithful,
I am resigned to decency.
I actually think I have found love and life.
What's the matter with me?"

When she died after fifty-seven years of marriage I felt the same way.

Perhaps it is appropriate to note at this point that my church in New York was the first in the country to establish a marriage counseling clinic staffed by professionals.

"Believe it or not," during those early days of my ministry, "I was a conservative." Thus I was opposed to woman's suffrage. I was hostile to the popular election of senators. I had little or no use for trade unions." As a loyal Harvard man, I applauded the famous remark of the college's President Eliot: "The scab is the great American hero."

But during those years at Dorchester I began reading such books as Henry George's Progress and Poverty. And Walter Rauschenbusch's Christianity and the Social Crisis. I was just beginning a shift in my thinking when I was invited at the age of twenty-seven to become the minister of the Church of the Messiah in New York.

Though the congregation was relatively small it occupied a magnificent building on Park Avenue. Its membership included the president of the Cotton Exchange and his wife who headed the Daughters of the Confederacy, a former president of the New York Stock Exchange, a high official of Standard Oil and the president of the New York Central railroad. In an anniversary sermon many years later I described the church in these terms:

The Church of the Messiah was a purely conventional institution. It fitted perfectly the prevailing pattern of Protestantism. Its membership was composed of a highly selective group of white Caucasians... Their church was like most churches in the Protestant world - not a public institution...but a private chapel, or even a club, which was hospitable in intention, but existed primarily for the edification and entertainment of the particular type of people who felt at home within its portals.

"With this exclusiveness in religion, I had little sympathy." Almost immediately I got rid of their system of private, rented pews. The officers were accustomed to keeping the church building closed all week. When they wouldn't let me use a room for a study, I rented space in a nearby office building. Then "all at once, to the vast consternation of my people, I became a tireless, and I fear, rather noisy social reformer." You can imagine the reaction of such a congregation when I began to attack the accumulation of private fortunes and advocated a society based on Christian socialism.

From that time on I became one of the most outspoken champions of what was known as the social gospel. One of my chief interests was racial equality. Half a century before the civil rights movement of the 1960's I was engaged in storming the barricades of racial discrimination. An early tactic my friends and I pursued was to buy theatre tickets in advance and then to arrive at the performance with a negro friend. When the management refused to admit us, we would keep our place in the line until the police were called and the issue was taken to the courts.

One day in 1909 five of us met in a dingy little office to plan a conference to observe the 100th anniversary of the birth of Lincoln. I was assigned with Jane Addams, the mother of modern social work, to prepare the program. Out of that meeting we created the National Association of Colored People.

A second organization that I helped to found was the American Civil Liberties Union. I was chairman of the board when we ousted the people who tried to turn us into a Communist front. I believe that the ACLU has "done more than any other single influence...to preserve the nation as the last best hope of freedom on this earth."

In 1930 I teamed up with my close friend Rabbi Stephen S. Wise to form the City Affairs Committee. Our aim was to expose the corruption of New York's notorious mayor, Jimmy Walker. Ultimately we helped force him out of office. During this period we entered into conflict with Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt, who did not act against Walker as aggressively as we desired. I did not share the enthusiasm for Roosevelt shown by other social liberals. To me he was a political opportunist, not a true idealist.

But the issue with which I became most closely identified was that of war and peace. On April 1, 1917 it was evident that Congress was on the verge of declaring war on Germany. I spent the preceding week with my mother in Cambridge, Massachusetts, thinking over what I should say on that Sunday. I was convinced that modern warfare cannot be justified on moral grounds. I was further convinced that the present war was the product of the greed and power-lust embodied by corrupt social systems on both sides. When I walked into the church that Sunday the congregation was so large that people were sitting on the steps leading to the pulpit. "This war is wrong," I told them. "Its prosecution would be a crime. There is not a question raised, an issue involved, a cause at stake, which is worthy the life of one bluejacket on the sea, or one khaki coat in the trenches. I say to you that when, years hence, the whole of this story has been told, it will be found that we have been tragically deceived, and all our sacrifices have been made in vain."

Out in Kansas a minister who took a similar stand was forced out of his pulpit and finally taken in by Pilgrim Church in Duluth, Minnesota. His name was Noble S. Elderkin. After that sermon of mine, our Board of Trustees held

a meeting to consider what they should do. Only one of them was sympathetic to what I had said. They passed a resolution stating that they repudiated my statement. But they concluded, "Mr. Holmes will remain here as the minister of a free pulpit in war as in peace, and pray with us that the grace of God may abide with us, and therewith help us upon our way."

About the end of that war, I came across an article about a man named Mohandas Gandhi. In later years I was fond of quoting a line from John Keats whenever I mentioned that discovery:

"Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken."

Here was a man who was putting into practice the non-violent principles in which I believed. Shortly afterwards I enticed people to church with the sermon title, Who is the Greatest Man in the World Today? Standing there in my Prince Albert coat, I declared in my impeccable Harvard accent that the greatest man in the world was a little Indian in a loin cloth. From the day I read that article, I considered myself Gandhi's disciple and I ranked him with Isaiah, Buddha, and Jesus among the spiritual giants of all time. I became his friend. In a phonograph recording sent to him on his 75th birthday, I concluded with these words:

"I have little of which to boast, but this I can say, when my account is rendered. I lived when Gandhi lived upon this earth. I knew him and I loved him. I tried to follow him. I am well content."

Gandhi's death at the hands of one of his own people was the most shattering event of my life. But I did not give up hope. In 1958 I wrote to a friend:

"The greatest thing that has happened since Gandhi's death is the work of Martin Luther King, who has taken the whole law and gospel of Gandhi's teaching and proved its worth anew."

Speaking of letters, I became known for my "ministry of correspondence." That was about the only ministry I was able to carry on during those long years when I was stricken with Parkinson's disease. But through my letters my prophetic voice continued to be heard, and I reached out as a pastor to hundreds of people who looked to me for counsel and inspiration.

I should say something about my vision of the church. In religion as in politics I was something of a radical. Not even the Unitarians could hold me. After our church building burned down in 1919, I convinced my people to become an inter-faith congregation and to adopt the name, The Community Church of New York. I looked upon this church as a public institution, welcoming people of every religious heritage and dedicated to social idealism. In 1912 I published a book called The Revolutionary Function of the Modern Church that anticipated many of the changes recent church reformers have been advocating. In that book I wrote:

"I see already the coming of a day when men will come to the church not for what they receive but for what they can give; not to be entertained or instructed or uplifted, but to be equipped in the whole armour of God, that they may again venture forth to die for the redemption of mankind...not a club of people who like to be together and worship together and pray together, but a great host of servants of the common good, ... of fighters of the good fight

for justice, righteousness and peace - this is the church of the new age!"

But if I made any contribution to the world, it was the fleeting contribution of a preacher, a contribution which like that of a musician can never be set down on the printed page. "One of the supreme disgraces of a disgraceful age" is the decline of real preaching. I have nothing but contempt for these chatty little sermons of today. If I preached less than an hour on a Sunday morning my congregation thought I must be ill. "A real sermon should be organized like a military campaign into an enemy's country, with an array of ideas 'as terrible as an army with banners.' Instead we are getting sermons that are like picnics into a nearby countryside for innocent exercise and play."

When I preached I was possessed. The powerful mind in me was wed to the immense passion in me. A fire was lit in my soul and suddenly I became the word - body, mind and spirit, I and the word were one. Then when I called for justice to roll down like waters, the heavens shook and the earth trembled. And when I spoke of the good and the beautiful, the spirits of other men soared with mine. To hear me was to share in a sustained sursum corda, a lifting up of the heart.

Even my friends often found my views too extreme, my rhetoric too flamboyant and my approach to social evils too simplistic. Take that little boy who heard my sermon about Tom Paine, the one who sat with his mother in the balcony at Town Hall where I preached for so many years after our church burned down. I fear that boy was infected by the dreadful neo-orthodox theology and the social pessimism in vogue during his student days. But from time to time he looks back at me and he thinks that there is always a place in God's scheme of things for those who startle the world with a mind-blowing vision of what the world might become. Once when I was in my early fifties I preached a sermon called If I Were Young Today. In that sermon I said:

"If you are really young, you are dreaming your dreams today of the better world that is some day to come upon the earth, you have your utopia and are not ashamed to tell of this Utopia to other men. You are remembering that Jesus was young and therefore lived not in the Roman Empire of his day but in the Kingdom of God in his heart."

Perhaps there is still a place for those who are young that way.

Beyond that, at least this much remains of me. That little boy who sat in the balcony still thinks I am the greatest preacher he ever heard.

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A hymn by John Haynes Holmes

"The Voice of God is Calling"

The voice of God is calling
Its summons unto men;
As once he spake in Zion,
So now he speaks again:
Whom shall I send to succor
My people in their need?
Whom shall I send to loosen
The bonds of shame and greed?

I hear my people crying
In cot and mine and slum;
No field or mart is silent,
No city street is dumb.
I see my people falling
In darkness and despair.
Whom shall I send to shatter
The fetters which they bear?

We heed, O Lord, thy summons,
And answer: Here are we!
Send us upon thine errand;
Let us thy servants be.
Our strength is dust and ashes,
Our years a passing hour,
But thou canst use our weakness
To magnify thy power.

From ease and plenty save us;
From pride of place absolve;
Purge us of low desire;
Lift us to high resolve;
Take us, and make us holy;
Teach us thy will and way.
Speak, and, behold! we answer;
Command, and we obey!