

Prophet at the Bedside: A Model for Hospital Chaplaincy

In *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann describes the role of the prophet as one who will “nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception to the dominant culture around us.”<sup>1</sup> Engaging in this understanding, I will raise the image of prophet as a model for hospital chaplains. Because of the complex reality of hospital chaplaincy and the scope of this paper, I will focus on working with families of patients “actively dying” a foreseeable death.

The primary marks of the prophet are to be a disruptive force, to guide people toward a communal identity, to act as mediators between God and the people, and to orient the community toward the Promised Land or renewed covenant with God. The Exodus story provides a resonant narrative providing chaplains with an exemplar to aspire to in Moses and points of emotional connection for families with elderly members in the hospital. Families, like the Israelites, are groups of people held together by common ancestors and a common history. For some, the hospital can parallel the desert. Home care might have felt like a burden, but being freed from this, families now find themselves in the desert, wary with the hope of promise waning.

Prophetic chaplains can challenge the U.S. culture of invincibility and disposability while leading families through “the desert,” giving them a glimpse of the promised land, and ideally opening a space for them to strengthen in a shared identity.

The first role of the prophetic chaplain is to be a disruptive force. In the context of the United States today, prophetic chaplains are called to overturn the prominent cultural narrative that death can be overcome by humanity alone—a techno-centric, individualistic (and absurd) notion. This prominent narrative spills off into the spiritual life creating an individualistic rather

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination, Second Edition*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001), 13.

than personal posture toward the Divine that ultimately leads to the fracturing of the community of the people of God and an idolatry of sorts. A chaplain must work against this by acknowledging the existence of death and suffering—naming the unnamable, bringing reality into focus so the family may begin to see the path ahead of them. They must journey through the desert, through the valley of the shadow. In this trek, however, they will not be alone. Chaplains must guide people toward entering authentically into their own history while they themselves are listening to the disruptive call of God.

Secondly, prophetic chaplains are called to help the family or group explore their communal identity. The experience on Mt. Sinai in Exodus legitimized the Israelites' identity as God's beloved people. Theirs was a God who chose to be relationally involved and present in their historical context as well as travel with them. God told Moses to "have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them."<sup>2</sup> Thankfully for those who are grieving, this isn't the only time God chooses to be among people. The Incarnation signals God dwelling with us in an even more intimate way by taking on flesh. Through his passion and crucifixion, Jesus descended into the darkness and desolation of death. He is willing to take this journey with his beloved, both living and deceased, again. As Gustavo Gutierrez says, "[t]he Lord is not intimidated by the darkness or by the rejection of his own. His [sic] light is stronger than all the shadows. If we are to dwell in the tent the son has pitched in our midst, we must enter into our own history here and now."<sup>3</sup>

Patients should not be disconnected from the formation of a communal identity. People

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 25:8.

<sup>3</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *Christmas Meditation: Christ's History, and Ours*. Retrieved from <http://thevalueofsparrows.com/2012/12/29/christmas-meditation-christs-history-and-ours-by-gustavo-gutierrez/>

have found it helpful to reconnect and reinterpret their relationship with the dying.

Remembering these loved ones by interpreting how their lives fit into the story of one's own can be a way of helping families understand their journey with their loved one.<sup>4</sup> “[The narrative activity of a griever] involves an attempt to access the back story of our relationship to the deceased, both to restore some sense of attachment security and reestablish a sense of continuity between the life we had and the life we face now “.<sup>5</sup> The act of re-remembering, (i.e. call to mind and rejoin) those gone from us has a biblical basis as well. The act of grace in Psalm 63 is remembering the experience of the Temple, which the Psalmist is no longer near. The Psalm makes God, who resides in the Temple, viscerally present again. Stories of loved ones have a similar effect.

Thirdly, prophetic chaplains are called to help families move toward healing by being mediators between them and God. Healing is not in opposition of this disruptive prophetic modality. In fact, it is the disruption that opens a channel to God. With the realization of death's power, we once again become reliant on God. The role of mediator is a primary role for Moses in the Exodus story. His own personal relationship with God and proximity of God's dwelling<sup>6</sup> to the Israelites allowed Moses to easily speak with God “face to face, as one speaks to a friend.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, chaplains are called to enter into the same intense intimacy with God in order to reveal it to those in her or his care.

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<sup>4</sup> R.A. Neimeyer, D. Klass, D., and M.R. Dennis, “A Social Constructionist Account of Grief: Loss and the Narration of Meaning.” *Death Studies* 38, no 8 (2014): 485-498.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*,489.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 33:7-11 explains the tent where Moses would speak to God was outside the Israelite's camp, but it was ostensibly near to it because Moses travelled to and from it and the camp with decent regularity.

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 33:11.

Getting a feel for how family members are relating to God in a time of grief may help the chaplain see the most fruitful way of proceeding.<sup>8</sup> One does not have to be explicit when revealing God's closeness and desire for relationship. Invoking the name of God can, in fact, be harmful in some familial situations, especially with families who have felt violated by the Church or in families in which religion is a splintering issue. One must be open to God's voice for direction as well as have a sense of the people she or he is among, just as Moses did.

The revelation of God's presence may simply be through the work of empathetic listening, that is, of being present to and acknowledging the situation at hand. Sometimes, the larger the crisis and the more emotions at play, the less words are needed. It could be that all that is needed in these situations is the presence of someone who cares enough to be with the family.

Other times require letting God's presence be known in the world by verbalizing God's words and making the community's needs known explicitly to God in prayer.<sup>9</sup> Expert chaplains either echo the family members' sentiments in prayer or allow them to co-create a message to God. Like Moses, chaplains need to be able to report anything to God—including complaints.

Throughout the journey of Exodus the Israelites complain and God responds.<sup>10</sup> The chaplain must be open to hearing God's voice and being moved to express the needs to the community gathered. Family members need to be able to feel whatever they are feeling without

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<sup>8</sup> Assessing one's attachment with God is an appropriate place to start building a framework from which to work from. See Lee Kirkpatrick's work linking John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's theories of attachment. M. D. Ainsworth, "Attachments Across the Life Span." *Bulletin of New York Academy of Medicine* 61 (1985): 792-812., quoted in Melissa Kelley, *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 60.

<sup>9</sup> Yes, theologically speaking, God knows our needs before even we do, but there is a healing experience of being truly heard by God in the presence of a prophetic mediator in prayer.

<sup>10</sup> Mostly in good ways, providing water (Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:1-13) and manna (Exodus 16 and Numbers 11:6-9). Of course, a notable exception is in Numbers 14:22-23 when God does not let those who tested and disobeyed God to see the Promised Land.

shame or guilt. Permission for any response must be given since grief is so complex and varied. Jesus gives us permission to stop pretending that death is easy to deal with, a gift, or a punishment. In John 11, “Jesus wept”<sup>11</sup> because “he whom you [Jesus] love”<sup>12</sup> had taken ill and died.

Finally, by following the example of Moses, prophetic chaplains are called to orient others toward the Promised Land. The witness to the hope of the resurrection is key to this. It might not always be appropriate to share this hope outwardly given the situation, but a chaplain must always have their heart fixed on God’s promise. The hope of the Promised Land holds death and new life in tension. It is a tension that recognizes the importance of grieving well and the importance for closure in this earthly life for those who remain.<sup>13</sup> By holding this prophetic posture, one that denies humanity’s ability to conquer death singlehandedly and emphasizes our dependence on God, a chaplain allows the family to remain in the desert experience, while knowing that this is not the end.

The desert must have its due in the lives of those left behind. It takes seriously the immensity of death. It honors the space that the dying held in their lives. The desert is a space of mourning, hopelessness, and witness, yet it is from there that new life emerges. Those wandering in the desert may come to find God’s open arms in a profoundly personal way. The possibility of the hope of God’s presence becomes manna for the traveler—just enough for the journey. But even in this feeling of forsakenness, God is present, yearning for relationship, guiding the weary into new life in due time.

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<sup>11</sup> John 11:35.

<sup>12</sup> John 11:3.

<sup>13</sup> Five trajectories for grief are laid out in Melissa Kelley, *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*, 17-20.

In most cases, the chaplain's relationship with the families and patients ends before they make it through a healthy grieving process and into a place of integration. We are only invited into the history of a people for a moment, albeit a crucial moment, to move them at their own pace toward the eventuality of the promise of God. Not even Moses made it with his people to the Promised Land. Much of this same posture fits in with situations in which the patient is conscious. Special care must be taken in these instances, as there is a tendency for families to make the patient invisible when they are actively dying.

The chaplain has an additional prophetic role while the patient is cognizant—anointing.<sup>14</sup> This can be done physically in a sacramental way or metaphorically. In the Hebrew Bible, many of the prophets anointed the king and legitimized their leadership. Anointing indicated that a person was chosen by God. This 'anointing' reminds the person of God's love for them and empowers them to be prophetic in the rest of their life. They can lead their family members into a deeper understanding of this reality. It empowers them to orient their loved ones to the Promised Land. It affirms that although they are dying, they have a role in the situation. They should not be objectified or made to be invisible. They can take part in the sacredness of remembrance.

Chaplains inhabit a mystical position—being in the midst of sorrow, but not their own, cycling between visibility and invisibility. Appropriate exits and referrals must be made. Moses himself picks Joshua to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land after he dies<sup>15</sup>. Chaplains must have the same humility and trust in God's grace to let go and leave the journey in God's (and others') hands. We are also called to a type of "self-forgetting," faithfully understanding that this

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<sup>14</sup> Although important, in this instance I am not referring to the Sacrament of the Sick.

<sup>15</sup> Deuteronomy 34:9.

story of suffering is not our own, no matter how closely it mirrors our history of suffering. The responsible chaplain must be self-aware and monitor their own response to another's grief, responsibly taking care of herself or himself amidst this heavy work lest their spirits decay in the process.

By being a disruptive force, a reminder of communal identity, mediator between God and community, and a guidepost to the Promised Land, chaplains can continue to lead God's beloved into the promise of the kingdom to come.

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