

## Prophets in This Place

Sara Stratton, KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives

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Texts: [Jeremiah 1:4-10](#); [Luke 4: 21-30](#)

I want to begin today with the Gospel reading from Luke, but not just this week's lesson. The lectionary is often an odd thing but today it is especially odd, with a Gospel reading that begins, *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

What scripture? To know that, we have to go back a week, when Jesus came into the temple in Nazareth where he grew up, took down the scroll and read the passage from Isaiah that foretells the coming of the Messiah:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

This is the moment in which Jesus proclaims his ministry, a ministry whose parameters are pretty clearly laid out in today's other reading from Jeremiah:

*"Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. ....See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."*

That's quite a job description.

Next week we'll read about one of the more mundane aspects of establishing a ministry – hiring – as Jesus recruits his disciples and gets underway with his work. But this week we see Jesus struggling to launch, finding himself a prophet who's unwelcome in his own town.

Jesus, setting out on his path to proclaim and bring about God's justice in the world, doesn't exactly get a warm welcome in Nazareth. He has a bit of a hand in this himself, giving his listeners a hint that his work is not just going to be about helping them, they who have known him since he was Joseph's boy. No – he's also going to help women, he's going to help outsiders. His ministry is broader than what they expect and want, and they are angry, very nearly running him off the edge of Nazareth's hills until something stops them and he is able to move on. But in so doing, the people have fulfilled Jesus' words that *"no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."*

Or as I've suggested in my title, in his or her place. We all have a place that we identify with. Place is one of those qualities, perhaps the most important one, that defines us. The "local landscape," writes Ellen Davis in *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, is "not just physical but also economic, political, and cultural." It is, in a sense, the summary of who we are.

Biblically, we are searching for the promised land, the land of milk and honey. When the book of Isaiah imagines justice achieved, the language is unequivocally land-centered: in chapter 55, the righteous are told that "the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." In chapter 58, those who act justly are assured that they "shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail."

Jesus knew his place. He knew it because over the course of his life and his ministry he travelled it, on foot and by boat, in contemplation and in action. He knew a land occupied by foreign powers; he knew a land in which people were exiled and shunned.

At the most basic level, we understand Jesus' ministry through his commandment that we are to love each other as God loves us. This is perhaps most meaningfully expressed in the story of the Good Samaritan in which we are challenged to reflect on who our neighbour is, and how we must relate to them. Historically, we have taken this to mean that we must welcome the stranger and stand with the oppressed. More recently we have begun to include nonhuman life in our understanding of neighbour, and so we may ask "what is my neighbourhood?" The act of justice-making thus expands to include the well-being of the whole Earth community and the consumer, economic, and political choices which affect it.

This year, KAIROS will be launching a program of bioregional discipleship. It takes the first part of its name from an ecological movement in which place is defined by geography and biology rather than by political borders. And of course the second part of its name is deeply resonant with our Christian tradition, though I believe there are many kinds of disciples in our world.

Bioregional discipleship demands that we spend some time trying to understand where we are located in the world. It expects that we will respond to the Christian call to actively care for the Earth. It invites us to understand the land on which we live, the resources contained within it, and the community, past and present, human and non-human, with whom we share it. It compels us to transcend both the divisiveness of political borders and the strictures of economic activity and to understand instead the natural connections among bioregions, connections which before the imposition of Western political and economic models sustained incredibly complex natural systems upon which human communities depended and often thrived.

My friend Ched Myers, an American activist and theologian, has written of bioregional discipleship: "we won't save a place we don't love; we can't love a place we don't know; and we can't know a place we haven't learned."

I'd like you all, just for a moment, to sit in silence and think about the place that means the most to you. It might be where you grew up. It might be where you have built or are building your own family. It might be a place you visited just once but which has never left your heart and imagination. Just sit quietly and think of that place. Get a picture of it in your mind.

- Why is it so important to you?
- What makes it "your" place?
- Who came before you in this place?
- Who and what share it with you now?
- What, if anything, poses a threat to this place?
- What would you do to protect it?

The picture on the front of your bulletin is of my friend [Julie Zickefoose](#), a licensed wildlife rehabilitator, holding the nest of a pair of eastern bluebirds. The chick, mouth agape in response to Julie’s mimicking the mother bird bringing food, is just a day or so old.



Now, you are saying to yourselves, why is she talking about bluebirds?

Well, the eastern bluebird has an interesting story. Indigenous to eastern North America, it was almost wiped out in the 1960s as the result of human behaviour. First, beginning in the 1890s, we imported European house sparrows which we thought were pretty birds but which also turned out to be invasive, displacing local species like the eastern bluebird by pecking birds and unhatched eggs to death and then colonizing their territory.

Then, in the years following World War II, our expanding human population began to build suburbs, light industry and large industrial farms, further disrupting bluebird habitat. And then, for good measure and increased crop production, we threw fertilizers and insecticides at the farmland – and the parent bluebirds literally brought these toxins home to roost.

*Day-old eastern bluebird chick and unhatched eggs in nest, Whipple, Ohio, 2012. Photo: Sara Stratton*

So why is Julie holding this little hatchling? Because she is part of the solution to problems we created for it. Julie’s nest boxes –she has a couple dozen on her 80 acres and the surrounding countryside in SE Ohio– are a “bluebird trail,” part of an effort begun in the 1960s to provide safe haven for these beautiful birds. She provides a place that is relatively safe from natural predators like snakes and racoons, she checks to see how things are doing, and once the birds are hatched, she’ll check to make sure that blowflies, which parasitize the young chicks, have not also laid eggs in there. If they have, out with the old nest and in with a new. Julie has even been known, in particularly inclement weather when food is hard to find, to cook up an omelette full of bugs and mealworms and deposit it on top of a bluebird box so the parents can find something to feed the kids.



Adult male eastern bluebird flexing his wing on a nesting box. Painting © and used with the generous permission of Julie Zickefoose.

Some folks have suggested that she interfering with the natural order of things. But another way to look at it is to see that she's trying to compensate for our earlier, bigger interference with the natural order. My own take on it is that she is following the imperative to build and to plant what is just, having plucked up what is not.

My larger point, though, is that she has this relationship and does this work with bluebirds – and other birds too, hummingbirds, phoebes, mourning doves; not to mention turtles and bats– because she has a deep connection to the place she lives and to the creatures that share that place with her. Julie knows her place. And she is, in a sense, a prophet in her place. She's probably even a little unpopular with some people.

Who are the prophets in our place? They might be the Friends of the Spit, who over the last nearly 40 years have worked hard to preserve the Leslie Street Spit as one of North America's finest urban wildernesses, even as it continues to function as a working landfill. Almost 300 species of birds have been sighted on the Spit, 45 species of which breed there.

The prophets might be the coalition of farmers, nature enthusiasts, and urban foodlovers who came together last year to prevent the development of a massive quarry in the middle of some of this province's richest farmland.

The prophets might be Chief Theresa Spence, the four women who started the Idle No More movement, and the thousands of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people across Canada and around the world who have joined them in the struggle to demand respect for Indigenous peoples and to protect our environment –our place– from the radical changes that have been made to federal legislation and procedures designed to protect it. I'm talking here about the changes to environmental laws that were bundled into Bill C38 and Bill C45, both of them omnibus budget bills.

These changes include shortening the time allowed for environmental assessment; allowing damage to fish habitat and removing protections for Aboriginal fisheries; changing the definition of "environment" to exclude water, fish and birds; removing protections for endangered species and thousands of lakes and rivers; infringing on self-government rights; and facilitating the privatization of reserve lands. The *Fisheries Act*, the *Environmental Assessment Act*, the *Navigable Waters Protection Act*, the *Species at Risk Act* and the *Indian Act* have been all been significantly altered by these omnibus budget bills.

We now know from documents released under access to information that these changes were the direct result of requests made to the federal government by resource extraction companies. They want to get shovels in the ground, and oil and minerals out of it, faster than they already are. They want to be able to transport bitumen and crude oil through pipelines that cross delicate ecosystems and the traditional territories of Indigenous peoples, and they want to build these pipelines as quickly and with as little fuss as possible.

And when people speak out against this, when they act prophetically to protect this place that we share, they find themselves unwelcome in their own towns. They don't get pushed over cliffs, but they do get hung out to dry in the popular press.

But they have a calling; they have a discipleship, a ministry to fulfill. In the name of justice, there are things that need to be plucked up; there are things that need to be planted and built. This is the discipleship that we are invited into. How will we respond to that invitation?

Amen.