

Portions of a Prophet

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

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First & Central Presbyterian Church

Wilmington, Delaware

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For generations of high school and college students, a subscription to *Rolling Stone* magazine was, and possibly still is, a rite of passage. The tabloid size bi-weekly publication has been the oracle of counter-culture since its founding in 1967. Originally pegged as just a chronicler of the burgeoning genre of rock and roll, its founder, Jann Wenner, has instead insisted from the beginning that it is much more than a compendium of music reviews and top-ten listings. In the first issue, Wenner wrote that *Rolling Stone* "is not just about the music, but about the things and attitudes that music embraces." This has become the *de facto* motto of the magazine.

As one can imagine, good church-going folks frequently found themselves on the other side of many of the positions and issues that *Rolling Stone* chose to promote or endorse. From the legalization of marijuana to the opposition to the Viet Nam War and its strong liberal leanings, *Rolling Stone* has staked out its territory at the far left of nearly every social continuum. Surprising then, that the magazine was quoted this week as a reliable source for dare I say, every mainstream outlet of national news, and not just in this country, but around the world.

General Stanley McChrystal, in what he described later as a "terrible decision," chose to discredit members of the administration on their handling of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, using language that eventually led to his unplanned and premature retirement. In other words, he mouthed off and got canned.

Folks in power don't cotton to underlings undermining their authority. They like it least of all when they read about on the front page of a controversial rag like *Rolling Stone*! What's the commander who ran all special operations in Iraq and who was the top commander of American forces in Afghanistan, thinking when he badmouths folks a heartbeat away from the Commander in Chief? Surely as the paper hit the stands on June 22nd, General McChrystal must have guessed that he'd be paying a brief visit to the Oval Office the next morning and packing up his own office later that next day.

Yet, for all we know, the general could be right.

Just because he got fired doesn't mean that what he said was wrong - it simply means that he discredited and angered people who outranked him and in a show of discipline and power, he lost his job.

I'm not suggesting that the general was right or wrong - I'm simply asserting the fact that in the brouhaha that followed the article in *Rolling Stone* he's been effectively silenced and to some degree discredited. He may be way off base (now literally and figuratively) and his ideas and opinions could just be plain wrong. On the other hand, he could be speaking some very difficult truths that are untimely and inconvenient for his superiors. Regardless, like US Soccer, - he's finished!

Let the word go forth to the next generation of leaders in our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq - should you not agree, even slightly, or have misgivings about strategy or direction - speak not in the public forum lest one seeks an early retirement.

Stanley McChrystal: insubordinate? Crank? Loose cannon? Or Prophet?

It's arguable that those four terms are not mutually exclusive and may even be synonymous. I suppose motivation and intention would delineate and serve to determine one's righteousness in speaking out. It also makes a difference as to which side of the desk you're on.

Elijah was always on the wrong side of the desk.

He, too, spent his entire career doing battle in the Middle East - not with terrorists and insurgents - but with various kings and consorts - most notably the dreaded Ahab and his pagan wife, the ruthless Jezebel.

There were others - Ahab's sons among them - but it's the long, protracted, unwinnable war with Ahab that got the most ink in the Bible. Elijah got a lot of press coverage - but he never got his own book. He and his sidekick Elisha were two of the most important prophets in Northern Israel, yet neither were prolific in their writings hence we only have 3rd person anecdotes. No personal interviews with career-killing quotes - just enough antics and antagonism to drive Jezebel and her husband to complete distraction. Elijah wasn't given the choice of early retirement - they just wanted the old fool dead. Luckily for him the hapless couple met their untimely deaths long before Elijah's whirlwind tour of heaven.

If Jezebel had written Elijah's story in the Bible, my guess is that Elijah wouldn't have fared so well. Clearly he'd be the "loose cannon" in the canon and not a prophet of high esteem - so lofty that like Moses, he doesn't die an ordinary death, and instead gets swooped up in a blaze of glory.

Jezebel would have left out a few details in her account about her and Ahab's crimes against humanity - and that's OK - we know how to fill in the blanks. Really - all the bad guys in the Bible are guilty of one or both of two things:

1. Worshiping someone or something other than God.
2. Taking advantage of those without status or power - i.e. the widows and orphans.

It started with Moses v. Pharaoh and continues throughout the entire book and happens right here and right now.

Youth, money, health, fitness, status, security, job - there are lots of things we worship, and we're still trampling the folks on the lower rungs of society. The more things change the more they stay the same proof positive that there's one thing that's still needed - and that's a prophet -- a prophet like Elijah - or better yet - one like Elisha, one with the wisdom to ask for a double portion of the spirit.

But then again - how would we know a prophet if she or he appeared?

Insubordinate? Crank? Loose cannon? Or Prophet?

It depends on which side of the desk you're on.

Sometimes we need a prophet - and sometimes we need to be the prophet - and sometimes we need to risk being insubordinate, a crank, or a loose cannon.

Anyone who seeks change in a system that craves stability even to the point of stagnation risks those labels in pursuit of a prophetic commission.

Such is the challenge facing Signe Bell and her cohorts next week.

The Board of Pensions of the PCUSA is a behemoth supplier of health and pension benefits to many of the employees of the church and some of their dependents. With 6.5 Billion dollars in its investment portfolio it provides for the long-term financial and physical health of nearly 40,000 people. It appears to be weathering the financial upheaval of recent years and has a hard-earned reputation for resisting change or input from the denomination. In short, the Board has justifiable confidence in its management and simply doesn't need a bunch of financially illiterate pastors telling them how to run their show!

The Board does, however, need a prophet and that prophetic voice comes in the form of an overture, a petition of sorts. In the current situation, the overture hopes to coerce the Board to change its policy so that it provides full benefits to same gender partners and their dependents.

As even a casual observer knows, this denomination and others in the mainstream, are embroiled in rancorous debates and division over homosexuality. We are seemingly obsessed with who some of our ordained folks fall in love with. More attention has been given and probably money spent on

speculation about the sex lives of a small handful of clergy, elders, and deacons than has been expended on poverty, hunger, and peace combined. We are a denomination obsessed with sex.

We should, in the opinion of this preacher, rather be a denomination obsessed with justice and with bringing the love of God to the far reaches of the planet - including our own backyards.

To that end, the Session of First & Central wrote and passed unanimously a proposed change to the benefits plan that directs the Board of Pensions to make benefits available to church employees, their domestic partners with whom they are in long-term committed relationships, and the children of their domestic partners on the same basis as, and equivalent to, benefits made available to church employees, their spouses and the children of their spouses.

The Presbytery of New Castle, the next highest governing body also approved the overture by a 2 to 1 margin. It now goes to the General Assembly which meets in Minneapolis beginning on July 1st. Signe Bell, an elder of this church currently serving on Session, will travel to the GA to represent New Castle Presbytery and to lobby and promote the passage of this amendment. She'll join overture advocates from two other presbyteries and together they will work for justice and to change the lives of hundreds of people. More importantly, this denomination, one of the largest Protestant collections in the world, will make a bold and prophetic statement toward the equality of all people.

I don't doubt that there are those who consider First & Central and Signe Bell cranks, loose cannons, and insubordinates - titles of which I could not be more proud. I am profoundly proud of a congregation like this one who risks reputation and standing to speak truth to power and to change a system that abhors same.

What excites me even more is that on January 21, 1973 a little girl, one month old, was held by The Rev. Thomas L. Thorne, one of the pastors of the church, and was baptized - just like Charlotte Ann. I doubt that any of the folks who gathered on that day, who sang "Once in Royal David's City" and listened to a sermon the next week entitled, "The Problem of Discerning True Prophecy," had any idea that one day, little Signe Louisa Clayton would represent them and their descendants and challenge the structure of the church they loved. Who knows what havoc little Charlotte Ann will wreak upon this venerable institution as she grows in her faith! Let's hope that it rocks and rolls its very foundation as she speaks truth to power in the pursuit of justice.

For it is our baptism in Christ that provides the call to ministry, that gives us the portions of a prophet that percolate, grow, and compel to action. Signe is living out her baptism by working on our behalf to make justice a more vibrant

reality in the church. You, this congregation, lived out your vows to “guide and nurture this child by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging her to know and follow Christ and to be his faithful disciple.” Signe was Confirmed in May of 1985 and has been active and outspoken before and since.

Signe is living out her baptism in a particular way with her service to the General Assembly. From young Charlotte on, we all are given ways to live out our baptism - to honor the vows made on our behalf and to give visible credence to the promises we make to our children and their families - regardless of what configuration those families may take.

Sometimes our call is recognize the prophets in our midst - and sometimes the call is for us to be those prophets. Action and response are the tests - for it is in the doing that we realize the portions of a prophet within us and in those among us.

To that end...may I invite Signe Louisa Clayton Bell to come forward...