



Five Years after Greta Thunberg Began Her Strike

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She started by herself. She started alone. She started with an action that many politically “astute” adults would readily dismiss as naïve and ineffectual. But on August 20, 2018, a 15-year-old named Greta Thunberg refused to attend the first day of school so that she could sit in front of the Swedish Parliament’s main building with a sign that read, “SKOLSTREJK FÖR KLAMATET” (School Strike for Climate).

Sweden’s General Election was a few weeks away, and the country had just experienced a record-breaking summer of heat and wildfires. Thunberg explained her action at the time by stating, “I am doing this because nobody else is doing anything. It is my moral responsibility to do what I can.”

Thunberg’s words and actions provoked a reckoning for many: Am I—are we—doing what we can? In many ways, Thunberg has played for our society the role of the prophet whom the bestselling author Ayana Mathis captured earlier this year in a powerful essay for the New York Times entitled, “[The Prophetic](#).” Mathis described biblical prophets as divine messengers who appeared in times of “big trouble,” who held up a mirror to society, and who disrupted “the smooth functioning of society and state to describe a difficult reality.”

While prophets are known to hold us accountable for our misdeeds or inaction, Mathis suggested that prophets do more than this. Their message is not aimed at compelling us to perpetually wade and wallow in guilt. Instead, these prophets call upon the better angels of our nature. They ask us to act as the just and righteous people that we are. Mathis further observed, “The biblical prophets’ laments were most always followed by a vision of what might come after sin and sorrow.” Prophets provoke accountability for the past and present, but they also provoke a dream—a dream of what can be and of what we can do to bring it about.

There is perhaps another further dimension of the prophetic that is worth emphasizing as we reflect back upon the last five years. Prophets, like Thunberg, might begin as “the lone voice in the wilderness”—to evoke Isaiah (Is. 40:3). The power of their message and their defiant action, however, create a social contagion that catalyzes others. Thunberg did not stay alone on that sidewalk in Stockholm. Others joined, and then more joined and more joined and more joined in what would quickly become a global movement.

Of course, not every prophetic action leads to a movement. Rather, the true insight is this: it is the sum of many prophetic actions that make a movement, and each of us can play a part. The truly naïve are those who discount such acts of defiance and resistance with armchair dismissiveness. As we look in the mirror five years later, the question is this: Am I—are we—taking prophetic action? Are we willing to disrupt the world today in order to save it tomorrow?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Dr. Brooks Berndt is the United Church of Christ’s Minister for Environmental Justice and the author of [Cathedral on Fire: A Church Handbook for the Climate Crisis](#). On September 13th, he and the Rev. Michael Malcom will cohost a webinar entitled, “[The Climate Strike 5 Years Later](#).”

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