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Eddie Aikau and the Prophets

Have you ever heard the story of Eddie Aikau?

Eddie Aikau was a Hawaiian lifeguard and big wave surfer who was born in 1946 and died in 1978. He came of age during a time when a surfing revolution was happening in Hawaii. Surfing hit Hollywood in 1959 when the movie *Gidget* came out and found a world wide reception. Californian and Hawaiian surfers began making more maneuverable boards and tackling bigger waves in the 1960s when Eddie was a teenager. He became what Hawaiians call a “Waterman.” He was comfortable and capable in the water in any conditions, whether surfing, swimming, sailing, diving -- you name it.

I’d like to talk to you about Eddie as a lifeguard. In 1968, he became the first lifeguard hired by Honolulu to work on the North Shore. He was asked to cover all of the beaches between Sunset Beach and Haleiwa, which is something like 15-20 miles. He served as a lifeguard there over the next ten years with one of his brothers, often rescuing people from surf ten, twenty, even thirty feet high. They didn’t have jet skis or zodiacs to help them, but Eddie managed to rescue over 500 people during that time.

In 1978, Eddie was selected for a cultural expedition on a double-hulled voyaging canoe -- a Polynesian sailing vessel -- which was to sail from Hawaii to Tahiti. Once it got outside of the Hawaiian islands, the vessel encountered treacherous seas and capsized. After drifting for a night, Eddie volunteered to paddle his surfboard to Lanai, an island 18 miles away, and he was never seen again. He is now remembered by the phrase, “Eddie would go,” because he went for help when no one else would.

Now, you might be asking, why this foray into surfing and lifeguarding history with the story of Eddie Aikau? Good question! The next few weeks of Advent is all about the Prophets. We are hearing from biblical prophets each Sunday which are telling us to get ready for the coming of a Savior. We are singing hymns like “On Jordan’s bank the baptist’s cry”, and “Prepare the way, O Zion.” Today our Collect talks about a “Merciful God” who sends us messengers in the prophets to preach repentance and to prepare the way -- for what? -- for nothing less than our salvation. And we have John the Baptist’s words saying, “Y’all are forgiven! Now you best come down here to this river and get clean -- to spiritually wash yourselves off.” He’s saying to prepare the

way of the Lord: straighten God's path to you, fill the valleys and level the mountains that stand between you and God. Make the crooked straight. Make the rough ways smooth.

I think that prophets are a lot like lifeguards. You might recall that I grew up at the beach down in Jacksonville, FL, and I must admit that I did not have the best relationship with lifeguards as a kid. I was always trying to surf some sandbar or storm swell and they would blow their whistles at me, waive their arms at me from their tall, red, wooden chairs, and try to get me to move down the beach, stay away from the pier, get out of that rip current and so on. But now, I can appreciate that they had my best interest and the best interest of the entire beach community in mind.

Like the prophets, lifeguards warn us of danger. We might not even realize that a current is taking us in a direction that we don't want to go. Before we know it, we could be way out to sea, growing tired, and losing our bearings. We could be in real danger. Lifeguards are there to save us. The prophets that are in Scripture and even in our world today are there so we might be saved also -- so that we might know the salvation God has in store for us.

I think many people are just like I was as a teenager when it came to lifeguards. We think we know better. We think we have it under control. We think that their warnings are well intentioned but don't apply to us. We think we can save ourselves.

You know what else is true? I think Eddie Aikau would say two things about saving people. First of all, rescuing someone is hardest when the ocean is heavy and chaotic. Our lives get that way, too, and it's funny how when things are the most chaotic, or when things are the heaviest, we often refuse the help we really need -- as if the prophet's words telling us to slow down this Advent, to smooth things out, and to find more time for God don't actually apply to us.

Secondly: it's also true that by the time the lifeguard gets to someone who is actively drowning, that person is completely out of control. They are kicking and hitting for dear life, gasping for air as they swallow water. It's extremely dangerous for the lifeguard at that point because the person drowning will likely pull them under, too. Many lifeguards have perished trying to save other people just like Eddie Aikau. And many prophets have perished, also, when their invitation to safety in God is an affront to our survival instincts when we are spiritually drowning. John the Baptist and others eventually paid the ultimate sacrifice in trying to rescue us from sin's chaos and the heaviness of our world.

Yet their words live on because they speak God's truth. Their warnings echo to us today, through the Scriptures, through our organ's pipes, through our prayers, and into our souls. The decision is ours: Will we ignore their warnings as we gasp for air and tire of trying to stay afloat? Or will we hear their call and heed their warnings to prepare the way of the Lord?