

Beginning with Us

Deuteronomy 18:15-20: the LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me **from among your own people**; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: ‘If I hear the voice of the LORD my God anymore, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.’ Then the LORD replied to me: ‘They are right in what they have said. **I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people**; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.’

“That prophet shall die.” That is God speaking, as quoted by Moses, God’s chosen prophet. That is our God speaking, whom we just praised in our Call to Worship with the words from the Psalm, “Our God is gracious and compassionate; our God is merciful and forgiving, our God is faithful and trustworthy, our God is just and good.

So, who, according to this God “shall die?” ---- God says: any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in God’s name a word that God has not given the prophet to speak. That prophet shall die. Is God being jealous of other gods here or being particularly demanding of the prophet?

No, this is our God being fiercely loving and protective of God’s people. God is our Parent who knows best and would not let any self-appointed imposter of a prophet misguide God’s children, away from the path, the values and the relationships God has for them for their own good and the good of their community. God knew, for Israelites to be led astray by false prophets, away from their God would mean certain death. God is fiercely loving.

But Israelites also knew God was fiercely powerful. They had experienced God’s powerful presence before, when God made the covenant with them at Mt. Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai, and spoke to them out of the fire. At that time, Moses had to stand between them and God and pass on God’s words to them, because they were too terrified to come to the mountain.

Moses is now speaking to Israelites, having led them through the wilderness and just before entering into the promised land. Moses will not be going into that land with them, so, he assures them that God will raise another prophet like him **from among their own people** and that they should listen to that prophet, because a prophet is what they asked for. Moses reminds

them, quoting one of them who had said, “If I hear the voice of the LORD my God anymore, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.”

Here, I wonder if you resonate at all with this terrifying sense of God’s presence. I have had many people tell me, especially those who live in such beautiful place as northern New Mexico, that they feel God’s presence the most when they are out in nature, whether hiking the trails or climbing the mountains, or soaking in hot springs, and I know they mean that to be a peaceful, restorative, enjoyable experience, rather than terrifying. I know I’m in awe whenever I look at the starry night sky here. My father, who was not Christian, used to scare me by saying if he had a chance to go to outer space, he would go in a heartbeat even if a safe return to Earth wasn’t guaranteed; so drawn was he to the beauty and the mystery of the universe, which taught him there was a Creator behind it and the humans weren’t it.

Then there are those of us who feel the presence of God when we are with other people, whenever we witness some random act of kindness or sacrificial bravery. Still others see God’s fingerprint in the creativity of human mind, intellectual capacity or physical prowess, master paintings and virtuoso music. But no matter how amazingly beautiful the natural world, however moving the human acts and the arts, they are the manifestation, reflection, or an expression of God’s creative power that made them all possible. Like the psalmist says, how great are the works of God.

I wondered, then, if what those Israelites sensed in that fire and heard in the voice coming out of it and were terrified, was that raw energy, the awesome force behind Creation itself, like the magma before an eruption, that is more than the creatures can bear to see or hear or touch. That life-giving, powerful force of energy is Love. And God is Love.

God is Love and this passage tells us of God’s longing to speak to us, so as to guide us into living as God’s beloveds and as God’s beloved community, and not fall prey to false prophets. And so God raised prophets of God’s own choosing and empowered them to bear God’s words in their mouths, so that the people could hear and obey God, who would always be speaking out of fierce and powerful love for God’s people, just like Moses did.

That ability to speak the red-hot power of God’s love is the authority God gives to God’s prophet. A true prophet of God speaks with authority, that is to say, with the divine power that makes the words effective means of God’s love; people who hears the prophets’ words spoken

with authority, listen to them. The prophets words spoken with authority transforms lives and changes the world, because it carries the power of God's fierce love for the world.

With that in mind, hear now the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Mark 1: 21-28. They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' ²⁶And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

This scene comes right after Jesus' baptism, his forty-days in the wilderness, his announcement that the kingdom of God is at hand, and his calling of the disciples. This is the first act of Jesus's ministry and Jesus begins on the Sabbath, in the synagogue, **among his own people**, who were gathered there to worship and to study God's words. And he went there to bring God's word to them.

People were in awe because Jesus taught them **with authority** and not as the scribes. This is not to put down the scribes, who were experts in interpreting the Law. Their job was to hand on the traditions that had been passed down for generations. The teaching of Jesus was different and they felt it; he was speaking the words of God's life-giving, transforming love straight from the source. Jesus had God's red-hot love on his lips.

Right then, a man who was possessed by an unclean spirit reacts to Jesus' presence and cries out. While the reaction of others are of pure amazement, the unclean spirit speaks as one who has been convicted. "What have you to do with US? Have you come to destroy US?" Apparently, this voice is speaking for the entire kingdom of evil spirits.

If the false prophet, of whom God warned Israelites, were to lead Israelites astray, the demonic spirit Jesus encountered had the man it possessed captive, tormenting him, sucking life out of him. Just like the false prophets, unclean spirit is a force that works against the life-giving, loving energy of God's for God's creation. Unclean spirit is the antithesis of the Holy Spirit. To use the biblical expression of the time, Jesus is a man possessed by the Holy Spirit, and his teaching with the divine authority convicts all forms of evil in the one who hears him. Just as our fiercely loving God said the prophet who would mislead God's people shall die, Jesus

commands the unclean spirit to come out of that man, and it does, and the man is healed, his humanity restored.

In biblical language, ‘unclean’ means, simply, contrary to the sacred. The modern-day readers may want to explain it away with a diagnosis; oh, it sounds he had a case of hysteria, or he must have been epileptic. The Gospel writer doesn’t name the illness; it is simply unclean. It is dominated by an antihuman spirit, which reacts to Jesus’ presence, his coming, because it recognizes, Jesus has come to overthrow them.

We know that spirit is still in our world, don’t we. The unclean spirit is whatever in our hearts and minds that resists and puts up defense when we are confronted with the challenge of Jesus’ teaching of the power of love, mercy, justice, forgiveness over the evil of violence and hatred.

This unclean spirit was inhabiting one person among those gathered in the synagogue to worship God and hear the teaching, like we do in our church. In Jesus’ time, there was no Christian church yet; synagogue was where people gathered to worship and to study God’s word, just as we do today. Jesus started his ministry of cleansing and healing, beginning with us.

John the Baptist who had “prepared the way of the Lord,” and said one greater than him was coming was the last prophet in the Hebrew biblical tradition. Right before the passage from the book of Deuteronomy we read today, Moses talks about different positions of leadership in the history of Israel as a nation: judges, kings, priests, and prophets. And they all served God. Not even the king had absolute power. The power rests in God who bestows the divine authority on those whom chose to speak the word of God’s fierce and powerful love for the world.

As the disciples and the follower of Jesus, and as church that is the body of Christ in the world, we, too are to have that red-hot radical Love of God on our lips, and when we dare speak with that authority of divine empowerment, that power of love will move our world. God’s love is fierce, God wants to fill the world with nothing but God’s love, beginning with Us, who gather in the House of Worship and Study of God’s Word, and commit to be Christ’s disciples.

As we approach the season of Lent, we are invited to listen deeply within and discern what spirits we are nursing among us, that is, within our individual hearts and as a community of faith, and then in our larger world.