

LECTIONARY REFLECTIONS

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

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Deuteronomy 18:15-20

These words from Moses to the Israelites underscore the serious nature of the vocation of prophet. A prophet serves as a buffer between the people and the consuming fire of God. The mouth of a prophet receives words placed by God. A prophet is accountable to God for speaking those words. Specifically a prophet, upon pain of death, cannot speak in the name of other Gods and cannot speak any words other than what God has commanded. The people of Israel notably have asked for this prophet, and here, Moses is assuring them that God will follow through. He will raise up a prophet similar to Moses. This prophet will connect the people to God. This prophet will speak with authority. This prophet will not be a stranger to the Israelites, but will be one of them.

How would you recognize a prophet of God? Who speaks with God's authority to you? Who speaks God's truth to you? Who helps you to feel connected to God? Who comes among you, not as a stranger, but as one who represents the power of God to you?

Psalm 111

We all want to be wise. What does it mean to be in possession of wisdom? *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."* To understand God and appreciate His power with awe and reverence is the beginning of the possession of wisdom. The psalmist exhorts us to study the commandments and works of God as a way to understand and appreciate God. *"Great are the deeds of the Lord! They are studied by all who delight in them."* This is thus the beginning of the fear of the Lord and the beginning of wisdom. When we study God's commandments and deeds, this is what we see:

- God causes His works to be remembered.
- God is gracious and full of compassion.
- God gives food to those who fear Him (who regard Him with reverence and awe).
- God gives His people the land of the nations.
- God send redemption to His people
- God commands His covenant forever.

Being in relationship with God means studying His commandments, remembering His works, receiving food, land, compassion, and redemption from His hand. What do you permit yourself to hold out your hands to receive from God?

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

In his letter to the Church at Corinth, Paul admonishes Christians not to be puffed up with knowledge – not to claim publicly that they know something. Such an arrogant claim proves only that a person lacks the "necessary" knowledge. In this particular section of his letter, Paul is discussing idols and whether or not it is a sin to eat meat that is offered to idols. He cautions that most "mature" Christians understand that there really is no such thing as an idol, since "There is not God but one." Therefore, meat that is

offered to idols is not a sin to eat, since the idols don't exist. All things, Paul asserts, point to God and exist through Him. However, Paul warns, Christians should be careful about public consumption of this offered meat in case they are in the presence of a younger, weaker Christian who still believes that idols exist. To see a Christian eating meat offered to such idols, would offend the conscience of this younger Christian. Such an offending would be the fault of the one eating the meat, not the one perceiving it as an offence. In this way, God holds all Christians accountable for how they are perceived by their brother and sister Christians. Further, Paul cautions, if younger Christians with weaker consciences were to see more mature Christians eating this meat, they too might be led to eat it even though internally they consider it a sin. Therefore, the one eating the meat would lead a brother or sister into sin. If you engage in this kind of behavior, and lead a brother to sin, then you sin against Christ.

While this advice from Paul is about eating meat sacrificed to idols, we can apply it any circumstance that confronts the church. Even if something is not inherently sinful or offensive to God, if we pursue it in the face of a fellow Christian who is offended by it, do we not sin against Christ? Living in Christian community means that we must learn to make room for everyone, even if they don't understand acceptable Christian behavior in the same way that we do. In our politically and culturally divided world, how can we make room for those whose understanding is different?

Mark 1:21-28

Last week, in the vocation narrative of Simon, Andrew, James and John, these disciples follow Jesus perhaps without understanding completely who He is. In this week's reading, the unclean spirits know immediately who Jesus is: "I know who you are...the Holy One of God!" Throughout this reading there are themes of trust, authority, submission and obedience. Jesus is one who teaches with authority, in direct contrast to the ambivalent and ineffective teaching of the Scribes. Jesus wears his mantle of authority and commands evil spirits to be silent and to submit. There is no equivocating. Jesus's authority demands obedience and submission in the face of chaos. His authoritative presence banishes darkness and evil.

As we consider the landscape of our world today, are there not "unclean spirits" which threaten our stability? In the chaos of our lives, many destructive spirits swirl around us and keep us from receiving fully the love and joy of God. Can you imagine Christ in the midst speaking a word of authority that commands these spirits to come out of us and to leave? In your own life, where does Christ stand and rebuke the evil and darkness which surrounds you? Where does he command that evil's silence and departure? Where does His authority triumph? As a Christian how do you point to that kind of world-changing authority? How do you allow yourself to become a channel for that kind of power?

COLLECT:

Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time, grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.