

The Prophetic Church

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Hymns – VT 209 – We Dream of a Turning; VT 156 – There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy; VT 194 – Lead On, O Cloud of Presence

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

¹⁵“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ ¹⁷Then the LORD replied to me, ‘They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸I 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. ¹⁹Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰But any prophet who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.’

Mark 1:21-28

²¹They 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 quiet and come out of him!” ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him 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.

Several years ago, we did a Lenten worship series called “Naming Our Fears.” In one of the discussions on this theme (it must have been in Adult Ed.), I remember we had a time of sharing things that make us afraid. One person’s response was simply “change.” Change makes them fearful. Now this response has stuck with me because it caught me off-guard. How can one be fearful of change? Life is so full of changes, some gradual and others sudden; some tragic and difficult, others we choose and find joyful, others we long for. Perhaps part of the reason I found this answer so hard to understand is because of how I understand the church and its calling: Isn’t the church precisely called to be a community focused on change, on making a positive change in

the world? But for we who live in relative peace and prosperity here in Canada, maybe those changes are really challenging. Perhaps they even feel like the end of the world as we know it.

Our Scripture passages for today are challenging too, encouraging us to consider what it means to be prophetic and what it means to cast out demons – two old-timey words we don't use much these days (thanks a lot, lectionary, for these selections)! Let's begin with the passage from Deuteronomy 18, all about the prophetic tradition. Now this passage occurs at a point when the ancient Israelites are despairing at a major change they are facing – specifically, a change in leadership. They are currently under the leadership of Moses, the great prophet, and like many of us, they worry that he's the last great prophet. Commentator Jason Byassee notes that “So much religious faith is so habitually backward-looking, it can sound like the best days are past and only gloom is to come. ... Deuteronomy points forward. God will be faithful. You will not be without prophets. God just keeps raising them up.”¹ So this passage is a word of hope to the Israelites that more prophetic leaders will be present with them after Moses.

But what exactly *is* a prophet? Ancient Israel had this very interesting understanding of leadership, where even later, when they have kings and queens, prophets remain those who offer guidance, who convey God's words to the people. This is a way of holding even kings and queens accountable; they are not infallible rulers with absolute power. We can see this in several stories where monarchs abuse their power, and it is the prophets who speak God's words to them to hold them accountable,

¹ Jason Byassee, “Commentary on Deuteronomy 18:15-20, *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revISED-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-deuteronomy-1815-20-6>

such as when the prophet Samuel anoints David as king because Saul was not being a just or faithful ruler (1 Samuel 16); or when the prophet Nathan condemns David's scheme to kill off Bathsheba's first husband, Uriah, so he can marry her (2 Sam. 12). We even see this in Moses's story, as he goes to the Pharaoh, the Egyptian king, to condemn the enslavement of the Hebrew people (Exodus 8). Prophets, in other words, are those who speak God's truth to the powerful, those who show a particular concern for the widows and orphans, those most vulnerable to being marginalized and left behind by those in positions of power. Today, to be prophetic is to be concerned about peace and social justice – to be activists in various ways, working for positive change! If you recall the story of the call of Samuel from my last sermon, the prophets even conveyed God's word to the priests, so they were in more direct contact with God than the religious establishment, calling them to account if they were acting corruptly.

This prophetic tradition is the one Jesus took up in his ministry, which is why he was considered so subversive and dangerous in his day. And our passage from Mark speaks exactly to this radical change at work in Jesus' ministry. While it perhaps gets somewhat lost in the translation, the Gospel of Mark is known for its sense of eschatological or "apocalyptic urgency."² Now before you start to think of scary visions of the end times or the rapture, that's not primarily what biblical apocalypses are about. The word apocalypse means "revealing" or "unveiling" – so apocalyptic literature is a form of resistance literature meant to encourage the early Christians in times of persecution. Things might seem terribly difficult for them at the moment, but all will

² David Schnasa Jacobsen, "Commentary on Mark 1:21-28," *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-121-28-6>

ultimately be revealed: God will set things right, bringing about the justice and peace that the people have longed for. So we see that the apocalyptic is closely linked to the prophetic.

Commentator David Schnasa Jacobsen points out the way that Mark emphasizes this apocalyptic immediacy, stressing Jesus' authority to bring about change, and quickly! Just prior to this passage, Jesus called four of his disciples, and they "just drop their nets and leave with Jesus – **immediately.**" The change Jesus brings seems to be instantaneous – startlingly so. Then in the synagogue, there is a man with an unclean spirit, and even "he seems to recognize Jesus' eschatological purpose of destroying evil, as well as his true identity as 'the Holy One of Israel.'" When Jesus casts out the unclean spirit, the people are amazed at his "eschatological power"³ at freeing this man from this unclean spirit, and changing his life.

So you might be wondering, what are we supposed to do with this story? These kinds of narratives are not ones we feel very comfortable with. Jacobsen points out here that our takeaway should not be something "about being helpful to strangers in church." That's much too mild for what's happening here! This is not about niceness or neutrality – it's about taking a stand, making the struggles of others our own, contributing to the change that those on the margins are desperately waiting for – this is what we are being invited into by this story. This is also what the "apocalyptic urgency" of this story is about. As Jacobsen says, "the things that threaten our world are not so much demons and ripped-open heavens but regular old broken or demonic systems of human construction."⁴ Where there is human suffering, we Christ-followers are called to

³ Jacobsen, "Commentary on Mark 1:21-28."

⁴ Jacobsen, "Commentary on Mark 1:21-28."

respond as he did – with resisting the powers of domination and violence with the shared power of healing and *shalom*. In this way we see that the call to apocalyptic struggle has a lot in common with the prophetic tradition – both are about changing the world for the better. So Byassee says, “all God’s people can be made into prophets – look what happens at Pentecost.”⁵ The prophetic, the apocalyptic – these are participatory, calling us to take part.

Now this might seem really daunting – you might be thinking that you didn’t come to church this morning to take on a prophetic, apocalyptic calling! That’s not what you signed up for! Don’t worry, I’ve got some good news: this community is already doing this. In fact, you’ve been doing this for decades. It’s true! I see this in the long tradition of refugee sponsorship that people of this church have supported in various ways. This work of supporting and building relationships directly counteracts the demonic, destructive forces of war, creating possibilities for a radically new life of safety and peace for these families – and for the sponsors. I see this in the stance of welcome and inclusion that this congregation has chosen, seeing 2SLGBTQ+ people as beloved members and leaders in the church – a stance which affirms and builds up the whole body of Christ rather than drawing artificial boundaries of discrimination. I see this in the weekly lighting of the peace lamp, such a simple, beautiful reminder that turns our hearts and minds to these issues in our community, our country, our world each week. These may each feel like small acts, but they are life-changing and world-changing in very real ways. Thanks be to God for these changes. May you have the prophetic courage to continue to work at them, together. AMEN

⁵ Byassee, “Commentary on Deuteronomy 18:15-20.”