

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony - January 31, 2021

Deuteronomy 18:15-20, Psalm 11, 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13, Mark 1: 21-28

This morning we heard a section of the Book of Deuteronomy, literally the Book of the Second Law. The first law was the 10 commandments given at Sinai when Israel began the trek through the desert wilderness to the land of Promise. Now they have been on that journey for many years. Moses has become an old man and would soon die. They are nearly finished with this part of their wanderings. They are anxious because it is apparent that soon Moses who has been their leader and guide will no longer be with them. And God makes the Israelites a promise which is conveyed to them by Moses, the one they trust. “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people;”

And so began a long history of prophetic voices, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea and all the rest. Prophets who spoke the words that God gave them, words of both justice and mercy. For God is a God of justice and mercy in equal measure. The people sometimes listened and they prospered and sometimes failed to obey and they suffered the consequences. But God never left them alone. Through the prophets God was present to the people in relationship with them.

Prophets have a two-fold function or ministry. They are the ones who are called by God to speak to the people the word that God wants to convey. It is a dangerous and often thankless task. In the words of this morning’s reading, “...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.”

The true prophet spoke only the words that God gave and those words were of two sorts. In the first instance the prophet called the people to repent. Literally this means to turn around, to move in the opposite direction. But before repentance must come the recognition of the wrong or sin. It was part of the prophet’s job to point out where the people had gone astray. It was often a lonely task, no one likes to be told they are wrong, sinners, in need of repentance. The second part of most prophetic words was to remind the people of the promises that God had made with their ancestors. Beyond a simple reminder, the prophet was tasked with pointing out to the people exactly how God was faithful and true, fulfilling the promises made. Usually God fulfilled God’s promises in unexpected and sometimes in unpopular ways. The prophets spoke of radical change and an unexpected future. Their work often upset a regulated and tidy world. No wonder prophets were often outcasts.

It is often said that the age of the prophet ended centuries ago, even centuries before Jesus. But, the ministry of prophecy, the prophetic voice that brings the word of God to the human world, that has never ended. Prophecy at its core is an important link in the relationship God has with human beings. As such, it is a part of each of our lives.

That relationship between God and human beings opened in a new way with the coming of Jesus into the world. As the Son of God, Jesus spoke in a prophetic voice, a voice that was an invitation to every human being to enter into the kingdom of God brought near.

The invitation to be a part of the Kingdom of God was issued to all humanity, but especially to the least in the world. Least in terms of power, wealth, resources and authority. Jesus brought a new kind of authority into the world, and this authority was what was amazing to those who heard him that day in the synagogue in Capernaum. The English word authority is a translation of a Greek word,

exousia or power. In this story what Jesus is exercising is the power of God to cast out the demons that had possession of the unclean man. It is this power this authority that is amazing because it is like nothing they have seen before. This was not simply teaching with words alone. Jesus acts in casting out the demons. It is this action that is both teaching and evidence that the word of God has come near. The prophetic word is always a call to action.

This Sunday and the next two, in the Gospel of Mark we will hear the voice of God through the actions and words of Jesus. They are prophetic not only for the people of that time but for us as well. Prophets are not only called but are the ones who call the community to hear and do the word of God. They have always existed, they exist still and are in our midst today, here and now. Many of you have had occasion to speak prophetically.

This Sunday we see Jesus in the Synagogue the place of religious tradition and security. With a bit of imagination we can see Jesus in the Church, the heart of the community gathered. Sitting right here, in the front row, or perhaps in the choir loft. Next Sunday we will hear of Jesus going to the home of Peter and healing his mother-in-law. The following Sunday we will learn of Jesus in the village square where he heals a leper. The synagogue, the home, the marketplace, all places where Jesus speaks the prophetic word from God. The church, the home and the marketplace are all places where we too are called to speak prophetic words from God.

In all of these occasions, Jesus actually spoke very few words. He acted on the word of God by healing. He healed a man possessed by demon, a woman of a fever, and a leper, all people in the society of the time who were the “least”, the neediest. All people in the society of the time who were neighbors least attractive, least powerful and least likely to be visible. These were the ones, who were healed and who were invited first into the kingdom of God.

What this story illustrates to us is that no one is left out, all of human life is part of God’s kingdom and precious to God. Those who are powerful in human terms and those who seem of be left behind are all part of the kingdom. Without the whole, the kingdom is diminished.

Do you know any prophets? Have you ever had an opportunity to speak prophetic words? Prophets are called and call others. We are each called as prophets by our promises at baptism, by those words we respond to each time we recite the Baptismal Covenant. Remember? We say we will with God’s help, we will resist evil, repent and return. We say with God’s help we will proclaim by word and action the Good News, that we will serve and love our neighbors and that we will strive for justice and peace. All with God’s help. God’s help often comes in the form of prophetic words and actions given to us to share with the community and the world. Sometimes God’s help is uncomfortable but it is God’s call to us to act and to call others.

God is a God of justice and mercy. We as prophets are called to bring that justice and that mercy into our world. Do you know any prophets? Yes you do, for you are a prophet entrusted with prophetic voice and word. Words of justice and mercy but also words of hope and healing. Words of God's love for the world.