

Deuteronomy 18:15-20
January 29, 2012

South Plains

How To Tell A True Prophet

Fifty years ago, some voices in the Presbyterian Church said that we absolutely must serve communion to African Americans even when they attend worship in a white church. It may be hard to believe today that anyone would need to say that, but some white churches closed their doors on a Sunday when African Americans tried to worship. The question was this: Was the voice urging that we worship together a prophetic voice with a true word from the Lord, or was it simply a trouble-some voice?

Deuteronomy 18 addresses that question directly because in ancient Israel people had different opinions about what God wanted, just as we do today. As long as Moses was alive, they could ask him. But even Moses had detractors; and what would they do after Moses was gone? In the verse just before our reading today, we learn that some people went to sorcerers, soothsayers and oracles of the dead for guidance, just as some people do today. That sort of magic was absolutely forbidden. The Lord tells Moses that the people will not be left in the dark when Moses is gone. Instead, the Lord promises to raise up a prophet like Moses. The Lord will put his word in the prophet's mouth so what the prophet says will be a word from the Lord.

Fast forward a few centuries when Isaiah, Jeremiah and Elijah are prophesying. The problem remained: was it a true word from the Lord? A few centuries later when Jesus arrived on the scene, he spoke with authority; he cast out demonic spirits and healed the sick. Nevertheless, he faced opponents who claimed he was not a true prophet.

I don't need to tell you that every preacher tries his or her best to be a prophet of the Lord. The issues are not always hot-button questions like civil rights, but the goal of preaching is still to speak a true word from the Lord. Obviously, we don't always succeed. But, how can the people know when the preacher is speaking a true word, and how can we know when he or she is speaking falsely or at least mistakenly? It was a question for ancient Israel; and it was a question for the people of Jesus' day, and it's still a problem for us.

Deuteronomy proposes the most obvious answer and also plants a number of clues when the obvious answer is not available. The simple and obvious answer is to see whether the prophet's words come true. When that California "prophet" predicted the end of the world recently and it didn't happen, that was pretty good proof that he is not a prophet. That's an argument that works best when the prediction is for tomorrow so that we can immediately look back and decide in the light of history. Most prophetic speech, however, does not include an immediate prediction of the future. When some voices

said that God's justice and righteousness require that we welcome all people to worship regardless of their skin color, there was no prediction of what would happen if we did or did not. We had to apply other criteria.

Deuteronomy provides the clues to those criteria. Let me point out two of those clues.

The first clue lies in the vocabulary of our question: we use the word 'word.' We are asking about a 'word' from the Lord. Ours is a God who speaks. "God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light," Genesis, chapter one. Feelings, ideas and actions are all part of experiencing God. But, at the heart of our relationship with God is the word God speaks. The most tangible expression of God's word and the most readily available to us are the words of this book we use every Sunday. We call it the Word of God.

Of course, the Bible requires interpretation. I'll never forget my professor assigning our first year class at the University the book of Genesis. We were to read the whole of Genesis, looking for what critics of scripture said were contradictions, inconsistencies, illogical conclusions and falsehoods. It was the most difficult assignment of that semester, and few of us did it to the professor's satisfaction. The reason we had so much trouble is that we were not accustomed to reading the Bible carefully. We assumed that we knew what it meant. Furthermore, we assumed that when we disagreed with what it meant, we who were first year college students, assumed the

problem was with the Bible, not with our interpretation. That, of course, was his point. We each bring our own perspective and bias to the Bible. That's how slavery was justified by Christians. That's why the role of women in church has been controversial. For the same reason, every major change in the history of the church has been fraught with conflict over interpreting scripture.

Despite the difficulties, the Bible remains an irreplaceable guide to listening to and understanding the word of the Lord. Even when we disagree with each other, scripture gives us a starting place for the argument and a rule for measuring the places of disagreement. Over the long history of the church, our engagement with scripture, our conversation with other Christians about scripture, and our willingness to test conclusions against the written word of God has been our north star to guide the pilgrimage of the church. It's no accident that the Ten Commandments are called by Judaism the Ten Words. That's the first clue to discerning the word of the Lord: we listen to the words we have.

The second clue lies in the recognition that it is a word from the Lord. We do not try to figure out what God is up to by depending on chance. We worship a God of purpose, a God of love, a God who has created us for a relationship with him. The initiative comes from the Lord. "I will raise up...a prophet." We don't choose our own prophets. One of the difficulties with democracy is the assumption that we should get a voice and often a vote about everything.

We are living through an anti-authority phase. Governments, political parties, schools and institutions of all kinds have lost much of their authority. The church can no longer speak with authority on morals or spiritual practices. Scripture is the touchstone of Christian churches, but even scripture is given only lip-service while the substance of the Bible is ignored. There are good reasons for some of that rebellion; and I am not arguing that we stop thinking and salute obediently to whatever the church or other institutions tell us to do.

I do think it is helpful, nonetheless, to recognize that part of the rebellion against authority is the temptation to assume that we can each choose our own god, set our own standards for obedience, and listen to whomever we choose. Deuteronomy 18:22 says, "If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken." Truth matters. Truth matters more than my opinion or your opinion. Because we worship the God of truth, what is true stands over against the half-truths and spun truths and slanted truths that inundate our culture today. One of the reasons we worship God regularly is because we want to acclimate ourselves to God speaking to us. The language of scripture is the language, the voice of the One we worship. We are listening for a word from the Lord.

These two clues to God's word come together in the person of the prophet. For the book of Deuteronomy,

the person was Moses, identified as the friend and servant of the Lord, the one who suffers in anguish when the people of God disobey in their trek through the wilderness, the intercessor pleading with God to give the people another chance, the proclaimer of the word on Mount Sinai.

I think it could be argued that none of the later prophets in the Old Testament, not even Elijah, really measures up to Moses. He is the standard. Or, rather he was until Jesus appeared. Jesus is the prophet proclaiming the gospel, teaching the Sermon on the Mount, the suffering servant foretold in Isaiah, the intercessor atoning for our sin. He is the prophet speaking a true word.

What this means is that we have a final standard for discerning the word of the Lord, the living Word. The way that corresponds with Jesus' way in the way God is leading us. We interpret the written word according to the teachings of Jesus who spoke with such authority in the synagogue of Capernaum. He is the word of God incarnate. His whole life embodies the will of God. To know who God is our best clue is Jesus himself.

As some of you know, Debby and I live in an old farmhouse that has needed many repairs. The most recent project was Debby's gift to me of some beautiful bookcases that were finished last week. If you have ever shopped in Lowes, you know that near the check-out is a long rack of do-it-yourself books with instructions for

building everything from an end table to a storage shed, and yes, even bookcases. I own some of those books and I've taken a class or two in woodworking. One of the cabinet-makers who built our bookcases was a young man about 30 years old. He learned from his father who was the other cabinet-maker. The father learned his trade by working with another man. We benefitted from skills honed and perfected over at least three generations. All the books and instruction in the world cannot take the place of an apprenticeship with a craftsman, working side by side as plans are made and problems overcome. We need an apprenticeship with Jesus.

The benefit of studying and planning and working with Jesus is that we can learn to know the word of the Lord. We will make mistakes and misinterpret the scriptures from time to time. But, we will always have the guidance and grace of the living Word.

And that how we tell a true prophet. Every prophetic word is measured against the living word. We will always ask how it fits with the words of the Bible and the interpretation of faithful Christians to determine whether it is indeed a word from the Lord. But, the final, sublime test is whether we can imagine a particular prophetic word on the lips of Jesus Christ, the preacher who spoke in Capernaum with such authority that even the demons obeyed and the people were amazed.