

Raise up a Prophet
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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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: ‘If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will 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 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.’

Mark 1:21-28

²¹ 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.

You may remember that Moses was the liaison between God and the people even before he brought them into the wilderness. Horeb, meaning *mountain of God*, is a landmark throughout Moses’ service as prophet. It was at Horeb when Moses saw the burning bush.¹ It was at Horeb where Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”² It was at Horeb where Moses said, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” and “O my Lord, please send someone else.”³ It was at Horeb, too, where God said “Go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.”⁴ From here we know Moses did as God commanded.

At Horeb, God sent the people back into the wilderness after a respite there and, before heading out, Moses shared his leadership with others after saying, “I am unable by myself to bear you. The Lord your God has multiplied you, so that you are as numerous as the stars of heaven. May the Lord, the God of your ancestors, increase you a thousand times more and bless you, as he has promised you! But how

¹ Exodus 3:2.

² Exodus 3:11.

³ Exodus 4:10-13.

⁴ Exodus 4:12.

can I bear the heavy burden of your disputes all by myself? Choose for each of your tribes individuals who are wise, discerning, and reputable to be you leaders.”⁵ It was from Horeb that the ten commandments were handed down, conveyed through Moses.⁶ It was at Horeb that Moses pled for God’s mercy on the people when they made an idol for themselves.⁷ And it was at Horeb where God promised a prophetic successor to Moses, a prophet from among the people, someone like them, someone who knew them intimately, someone they trusted to identify with them.

Of course, just as with Moses, knowing the people doesn’t guarantee that the people will obey or follow or believe in the authority of the one who speaks. We know this from the complaints of the Israelites in the wilderness: “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”⁸

What we read about Jesus in the synagogue is foreshadowed by Moses’ story. If we were reading Mark for the first time, we might feel positively when we hear that the people in the synagogue thought aloud, “What is this? A new teaching – with authority!” We who have heard the whole story, though, know that the time will come when those whom Jesus comes to help will turn on him, preferring things the way they have been because they are comfortable, even if they’re not right. They will say “Let us alone!” And when Jesus does not, because the message is too important for him to choose his comfort, his likability, over what they need, they cannot bear the words he carries and they will kill him for his efforts which challenge the way things have always been done.

Carrying the words of God, delivering the words of God, has never been an easy thing for the bearer. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and even Jonah struggled. Challenging injustice and hatred and oppression – because these are not ways of being of which God would approve – necessitates extraordinary fortitude to be in the world with others, especially those who are not the victims of injustice and hatred and oppression. In all the stories we know, we can understand why a first response would be, “Don’t you think someone else would be better suited than I?”

Thank goodness for those who, reluctantly or not, answer God’s call to speak God’s words. Perhaps those who say “yes” noticed how Moses went from being the one who asked God to “please send someone else” to one who loved the people so much that he stood up for them in even the most frightening situations to the one who taught others how to do the same to the one who willingly accepted

⁵ Deuteronomy 1:9-13.

⁶ Deuteronomy 4:12-14.

⁷ Deuteronomy 9:25.

⁸ Exodus 14:11-12.

that God’s work would not be accomplished in his lifetime or finished through him. This is very far to come from where he began. What Moses did was not unlike the answer to the old question: How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.

When faced with any daunting request by God, how easy it is to see an elephant, perhaps even to feel the weight of it! But note what God says – “I will raise up a prophet.” It’s never “I will ask a prophet to raise himself or herself.” There are so many places in our scripture that remind us that nothing God puts before us is meant to be handled by us on our own. Just one is Psalm 121: The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time and for evermore. God will not “let us alone” because God’s love for us is too great. This same great love was on display when Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath – the Sabbath! – because his care for the man was far greater than his care about human understandings of the Sabbath.

Of course, prophets, those who take risks for the sake of God, don’t look only like Jesus or Moses or Isaiah. Prophets are Dorothy Day and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And prophets are young boys like one named Christian who learned about a playground bench in Germany and was so compelled by its purpose that he brought it to the attention of his teacher and his principal so they might bring it to his school. Its incarnation in the US is the Buddy Bench.⁹ The aim of the Buddy Bench is to make it so no one feels alone on the playground – if you are feeling lonely and sit on the bench, your presence is an invitation for others to come connect with you. Schools across the country learned of this program and have added their own buddy benches. Because a young boy spoke up for those who were not speaking up, or could not speak up, for themselves.

You may have heard about a boy named Tommy who found out the young water coach for his football team was being bullied in part because he liked to wear suits to school.¹⁰ Not only did he stand behind the boy, Danny, but he asked the team to join him and so they all wore suits to school. There are plenty of adults who speak the difficult words and carry out the difficult tasks. I lift up these children because I remember what it was like to be a kid. Wanting to be liked is something that has carried into my adult life but it is a shadow of what it was in my childhood. Did you feel that way? I am floored by children who forgo those kinds of concerns because the welfare of others outweighs their own desires. If they can be prophets, if they can stand for what God would stand for, how much easier it can be for us who have grown into adulthood, and hopefully a fuller sense of self, to do the same. Next time, you silently ask, “O my Lord, please send someone else,” I invite you to remember Tommy. And Christian. And Moses. And remember the ordination vows taken by our elders and deacons just a couple of weeks

⁹ www.buddybench.org

¹⁰ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/16/danny-keefe-ellen_n_4453817.html

ago – I will, with God’s help. Next time, I hope you consider making this your answer when God prompts you. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: God of love, help us to speak your words in the face of injustice, hatred, and oppression, we pray. Amen.