

**Speaking in God's Name**  
**Deuteronomy 18:15-20**  
**First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**  
**January 31, 2021**  
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I remember several years ago when I was preparing to leave the congregation I was serving at the time. The circumstances were such that we had several months' notice. That time was spent with a balance of continuing to do ministry together, grieving our upcoming separation, and helping the congregation prepare for what would come next while at the same time recognizing that what came next was not mine to lead.

One of the conversations we often had, as I am sure this congregation did when John retired, was a conversation about *who* would come next. What would the process of calling a pastor be like? How would they know who to call? Would the person they needed want to come and serve them?

And my answer, time and time again, was to both reassure them that pastors would feel lucky to serve that congregation, and also to remind them that if they listened carefully they would know who God was calling for this next stage of their life together.

I think of that experience as I read this text. Because our reading today from Deuteronomy, although not recorded until much later, is part of what is traditionally understood as Moses' parting words.

Moses had been called to lead the people out of bondage in Egypt. He had led them through the wilderness. Over the years, decades actually, they began to develop an identity as a people in particular relationship with God. And throughout that time Moses served not only as leader, but as intermediary between God and the people, a prophet called by God. So, during their years together Moses spoke to the people on God's behalf. Moses spoke to God on behalf of the people. And at different times Moses defended each to the other.

The people came to learn (even if sometimes they behaved in ways that didn't reflect it) that they could trust the words of Moses, that he was a prophet speaking for God.

And so here they are, nearing a time when life will change, when they are about to enter what they understand to be the promised land, but a time when Moses will no longer be going with them. Rather, a new leader will be called forth.

But, how will they know? How will they know who this person is? How will they know who to listen to? What will they do without Moses? These questions are real to the people as they look toward the future. And in the midst of these questions comes the reassurance that God will continue to go with them and will continue to speak to them through another prophet.

And even though our situation may be different, we, too, ask questions about how to know what voices are speaking on behalf of God and which are, as we might say, wolves in sheep's clothing, or at least imposters working for their own benefit. We, too, know that it is not always easy to identify the prophets among us.

So, perhaps we look to scripture to remind us who true prophets are. In scripture we find that:

Prophets are usually not popular. So, we can't necessarily look for a crowd or in these days of social media count shares or likes to determine prophetic prowess.

Prophets are usually not excited about the task to which they are called. So, we can't just look around to see who has volunteered to wear the title.

Prophets are more often in conflict with earthly leaders rather than in uncritical agreement with them. So, yes-men should be taken off the list.

Prophets are more often than we like to admit bringing a word that is difficult for us to hear, so if we are never challenged by what is said, then perhaps we should hesitate to use the title prophet.

Just this list alone reminds us how carefully we have to pay attention to know who to listen to. And yet, even though the task is challenging, it is one we cannot avoid.

Because, we need prophets. We need people who will speak on behalf of God. We need people who will speak Truth even when Truth is not wanted. We need people who will stand for the values of God's heart. And we need people who will call us back into faithful relationships with God.

And this story reminds us that God continues to work through people. This story reminds us that even when we are in those times in our lives where we wonder if God is still speaking...indeed, God is.

So, we are called to listen carefully and to discern wisely. We are called to open our eyes to see the ways God is working in our midst, even from among our own people. We are called to approach one another with an open heart, willing to hear a word we don't expect or even, at first, don't like.

And, friends, this discernment is important work. Perhaps the parts of this text that make us most uncomfortable are the last sentences in today's reading where we hear, *"Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But 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"* (Isaiah 18:19-20, NRSV).

See, often we hear this and we get nervous about the language of accountability and especially punishment there...and often in our nervousness we just set passages like this aside.

But what if what we hear is the importance of speaking on behalf of God?

What if what we hear is that when we hear a word that we know deep down inside is from God, we have a responsibility to respond, to follow it?

What if what we hear is that when we are tempted to use scripture or the name of God to get our way, we have a responsibility to stop?

What if what we hear is that whenever we speak or act on behalf of God, we need to do so carefully, honestly and with humility?

See, today, we don't have the role of prophet in the same way we see it play out in scripture. And yet, there are prophets among us. And rarely do we identify them because their sentence starts, "Thus says the Lord..." More often we meet prophets as they speak with tenderness to a troubled heart...as they wash the feet of a homeless neighbor...as they fight for protections for people who are disadvantaged...as they name evils for what they are. More often we meet them as people who take seriously the instruction to live and love in the ways of Jesus and who recognize that they are partners with God in the building of kin-dom.

And the reality is that whether or not any of us wear the title of prophet, each of us - as people of faith - has a responsibility to take seriously what we say and do in God's name. Each of us has the opportunity to make the world better on God's behalf.

May we live with faithful discernment in ways that through our words and deeds bring God's word to our broken and beautiful world. Amen.