

Presuming to Speak in God's Name
Deuteronomy 18:9-20
Mark 1:21-29

“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.”

What in the world are you doing here, on a hard pew, of a Sunday morning? And what am I doing here, in a raised pulpit, presuming to speak to you of God when I cannot but I must? Both questions, it seems to me, are begged by our lessons: an excerpt of Moses' farewell speech to Israel concerning the people's need for a mediator, lest they be destroyed by God's nearness; and the story of Jesus' first appearance in the place of organized religion on a sabbath when the power of God's Word, the reality of God's presence in him, literally blows the minds of an unsuspecting congregation.

We begin with the question of your presence on a hard pew of a Sunday morning: why are you here? Presumably your presence has something to do with your relationship to God. You have come to praise God or to seek God; to listen for God's word or to wrestle with God's silence; to beseech God in extremis or even to berate God amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing. Each of us enters the sanctuary carrying matters of consequence we cannot quite bear alone; we venture through these doors wanting a word not our own, a light in the darkness, to make sense of the present hour and to illumine the way ahead, even though we should struggle to believe the astonishing claim that God is for us. As an unattributed editorial put the matter of our human situation before God in the somewhat dated prose of 1947:

Since the gateways of entrance into life and of exit from life swing on their massive hinges but once—the first before our eyes are opened and the second after they have been forever shut—we are left with no means of answering the baffling questions which existence poses. What then? Three alternatives face us. We may close our minds to the questions and settle down to the business of existing in the most meaningful way possible during the span of our years, as though that were all....The second alternative is to advance human guesses—to stand like blind men before the impenetrable barriers of birth

and death, and imagine what lies beyond; or like mariners on the shore of a trackless sea, presuming that something lies on the other side, but uncertain at best and ignorant of what it is like even if it should be there...a fearfully precarious basis on which to build [a] life....The third alternative is *that we shall be told what we do not know by Someone who does know*. Although we are unable to explore the beyond, One from the beyond may come to us. Although we cannot cross the impassable sea which walls in our three score years and ten, yet we can welcome One who has crossed the span from the other shore, and listen while he tells us what, by our own guessing, we could never have known. This [says the writer] is revelation—the drawing back of the black veil from the face of eternity by a Hand greater than ours....

Let me say again, you could have stayed home, taken a walk on the Wissahickon, surmised--from a feeling evoked in the natural world--that there must have been an author. This is general revelation, say the theologians: what anyone can conclude, by looking around, of God's existence. But when the question of your life and death is up, this idea of God can only take its place alongside others, in the marketplace of interesting ideas, unless God should come to you. The word you have come to hear from the Lord is a word known as special revelation: a word from outside our human existence, a conversation initiated by God, a relationship mediated, always mediated, through the words of Scripture, the history of Israel, the law and the prophets, the ongoing proclamation of the church's apostolic witness, all of which point to the scandalous particularity of one Word: the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ.

This gets us to the question of why I am here. The answer is implied in Paul's questions to Christians in Rome: "How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? These questions were the questions of the Israelites as they crowded around Moses, at the bottom of Sinai, to hear a word from the Lord. They were a people whose fear of the revelation of God on the mountain had made them beg God never to come close to them or be seen by them again, lest they die. Still, they longed for a word from the Lord and so asked Moses to be a go-between, to mediate God's word to them and carry their needs to God, as

they struggled to survive in the wilderness. The narrative leaves no room for doubt: Moses had been chosen by God to do just this.

Before us this morning, in the Book of Deuteronomy, is the final sermon of Moses to the children of Israel. Knowing he would not enter the promised land with them, Moses assures God's people that he is only the first of many prophets who will be authorized by God to speak for the Lord. But the people immediately intuit the problem inherent in Moses' assurance, a problem that is with us to this day: how is the community to discern the true from the false prophet? How are we to know who it is that mediates God's word and who presumes to speak in God's name a word that is not from God?

The problem becomes even more acute when we realize that the historical situation of God's people as they hear these words is the exile. They are in a far country. The only difference between them and us is that they know this. The time is the sixth century B.C.; the place is Babylon. With the temple destroyed, the promised land occupied, and God's people scattered, Israel's God has fallen silent. "Ironically," says exegete Richard Puckett, "the problem of the sixth-century people is the opposite of the overwhelming theophany [manifestation] of God at the holy mountain. The question of the people in exile is not how to survive a confrontation with the power of their God. Rather, the question is where to find the presence of that God who seems absent—where and who is the God who let this happen to us?"

Moreover, they are surrounded by a culture taken with an astonishing array of techniques for conjuring the presence and power of other gods: child sacrifice, divination, soothsayers, fortune-tellers, the casting of spells, the consulting of ghosts or spirits, channeling the voices of the dead. Here were prophets of various and sundry gods, promising these vulnerable and lost souls--for a price--the sort of god who would bestow blessings or avert tragedy if approached

with secret words or proper rituals or perfect sacrifices.

Enter the prophets of Israel's God. The contrast is astounding. Ezekiel wrestles with questions like: "Has God abandoned Jerusalem and the Temple? Does the suffering of God's people have a purpose? How should the people understand their tragic history? How can God now move on with God's people?" To wit, can these dry bones live again? Second Isaiah, who likely had been deported and so prophesied as an exile among exiles, spoke a word of comfort and hope, a word of God's nearness: "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Behold your God!'" Here were voices wrestling with the complexity of human history in relation to the purposes of God and with the reality of God's presence even though God should seem to be absent.

How were God's people to know that the words of Ezekiel or Isaiah mediated a word from the Lord? "If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true," says Moses, "it is a word that the Lord has not spoken." The point is not that prophetic speech has to do with words that predict the future, but rather with speech that is a true witness to God's grace and judgment and deliverance which have happened or are happening or are to be expected. You could say, therefore, that God's people can know the true word of the Lord only in retrospect, as they look back either from the fullness of life lived by a word that has told the truth about the purpose of their three score years and ten; or from the emptiness of life lived by a word that has led them to waste their days on a mess of pottage.

But I am here to say more. The prophets mediated the word of the Lord to a people in a far country who, in the wilderness, begged that God not come close and, in Babylonian exile, longed for some sign of God's nearness. They spoke on behalf of God to God's people and on behalf of God's people to God. Their words were words of judgment and of promise, of lament

and of thanksgiving. Yet the prophets could not do away with the distance between God and God's people, for it was in them too. They could only suffer it; they could only occupy and traverse the distance until that distance should be ended in the one Word of God to whom their words had truly pointed from the beginning.

When Jesus entered the synagogue in Capernaum, Mark tells us that he began to teach as one with authority, not as the scribes. Unlike the prophets of old, he was not a “negotiator running to and fro between two parties, now speaking for the one, now for the other.” Rather, he *is* God's Word. I am here to say this: to say that God has come to you in him; to turn your life toward him in whom the reconciliation of God with human being—with you—has been accomplished; to announce that in him the one true thing we cannot know without him is made known: that God is with us and for us. Why am I here? Like John the Baptist in Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece that hangs in the study of many a preacher, including mine, I am here to point to him. I am here because the God who has spoken in Jesus Christ, has addressed me through the witness of the prophets and the apostles, In fact, given the canon, I may *expect* in their words to hear God's word, even though I should wrestle, often until the break of day, for a blessing and a name. Were I to speak about God on my own; were I to speak on the authority of my own experience or my personal feelings or the spiritual stirrings of my heart, I would be speaking a word God has not spoken. I am here to point to the Word of God that is Jesus Christ.

Still, the question of the man with the unclean spirit is our question every Sunday: What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” We may not shout this out loud in a proper Presbyterian service of worship, but each of us has come with the question of what must die in us if we are to live in him. “Be silent” says Jesus, and it occurs to me that if God's Word is to address us, all the other voices vying in our minds and hearts for our attention and our allegiance

must fall silent. Listen for God's word, we say as we begin to read the Scripture lessons. I see your minds wander. Listen! Listen for the living Word that death could not silence. Listen as the congregation in Capernaum listened, because he who walked through the door of the synagogue and began to teach with authority is alive. He is here among us. Perhaps even this morning "*we shall be told what we do not know by [Him} who does know....[For] although we cannot cross the impassable sea which walls in our three score years and ten, yet we can welcome One who has crossed the span from the other shore, and listen while he tells us what by our own guessing we could never have known. This is revelation—the drawing back of the black veil from the face of eternity by a Hand greater than our own.*" This is the Word of the Lord. Listen to him!