

"THE Prophet"
Deuteronomy 18:15-20

January 29,2011

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

One of the most fascinating papers I heard while I was at the seminary in Fort Wayne had to do with church and theology in our technological age. It was largely an analysis of a controversial blog on the internet entitled, "Theology and the Church After Google." In this blog, the author wrote, "No institutions, and very few persons, function as authorities for theology after Google. Ever since Jesus' (often misunderstood) statement about Peter that "on this rock I will build my church" (Mt. 16), the church has had issues with authority."

I would agree that this is a huge issue, not only in society, but in the Church today. Who should we listen to in order to determine what is right? Who has the authority to decide such things?

We want the freedom to listen to many voices in order to determine our beliefs and practices. All have some authority, but perhaps not equal authority, in our postmodern age. In that blog post, the author said that it used to be the theologian's task to be the "keeper of the faith" and to insure doctrinal purity. Now, the author says, the job of a theologian is not to give right answers but to be "a convener of and participant in the discussions."

Actually, I think we want the freedom to listen to one voice – our own – in determining beliefs and practices. We don't want to submit to anyone's authority other than our own. I want to believe what I want to believe. I want to do what I want to do. Who are you (or anyone else) to tell me anything differently? People are encouraged to follow their hearts. Listen to the voice within. Do what you want to do.

We act as if this was a new phenomenon, but it's not. People have wanted to listen to their own voice and follow their own way from the time sin entered the world. The essence of Satan's temptation of Eve was *not* to do wrong, but to question what God had really said and to become her own God, that is, her own authority.

Nevertheless, God continued to speak to His people through prophets. Usually, we think of prophets as those who can predict the future, but that was only a small part of their job and was done only so far as it served their purpose. The prophet's chief job was to be a spokesman for God. He was more of a "forth teller" than a "foreteller". A prophet was not to speak his own ideas and theories. He was to speak the words which God gave him.

God's people were to receive the prophet's words and act in obedience to them. Often, they did not. They would reject the prophet's words and the prophet himself. Sometimes they would do bodily harm to the prophet and even kill him.

Early on in the history of the people of Israel, God promised that He would send a special prophet. Our text for today speaks of him. He would be better than Moses, but still from among the people. God would put His words in the mouth of the prophet and this prophet would speak to the people all that God had commanded. The people were to listen to him. Failure to listen to this prophet would result in judgment.

This prophet of whom Moses speaks is the Christ. We often think of Jesus as our Savior, our Intercessor, our Intermediary, and even our Friend, but we may not think often think of Him as a Prophet. Yet the writer to the Hebrews says, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." (Heb. 1:1) Jesus, the Word made flesh, came to speak to us the words of God. God reinforced the command He gave through Moses when Jesus was on the mount of Transfiguration when He said, "'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!'" Yet are we listening?

I think most people are willing to listen to Jesus – as long as he is the sweet Jesus who loves us and tells us how special each of us is. This is non-threatening and very affirming. But Jesus has lots more to say. He speaks with authority as the people in the synagogue in Capernaum recognized in our Gospel for today. Some of it we may not want to hear.

For instance, Jesus spoke the Law quite harshly. We like to think of ourselves as basically good people. We think of sin as a series of outward actions which we can correct if we try hard

enough. That's why we often listen to the voice of this age which calls us to listen to our heart and to follow our heart and even give our heart to Jesus because that will make everything better. Jesus says something very different. The heart is not the answer nor is it a fitting gift to God. It is, in fact, the problem. Jesus says, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." (Matthew 15:19). You are not simply a sinner by action. You are a sinner by nature. You are not merely a sinner on the outside. You are a sinner to the core of your being. Are you listening?

Jesus speaks judgment quite clearly. Many people think that God will somehow grade us all on the curve. He will judge us all by how hard we try. If we try our best, God will be satisfied and sin will be forgotten. Rob Bell, a young pastor from Michigan, wrote a controversial book last year called "Love Wins" in which he calls into question the existence of hell. Jesus says something very different. In His teaching about the final judgment, he says to those in whom sin remains, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matt. 25:41) There is an eternal fire for those cursed by sin. Are you listening?

But Jesus speaks Gospel, too. He speaks of a way of salvation. Most people outside the church (and some people within the church) think that, since sin is something bad we do, salvation is accomplished by something good we do – if we are just moral enough or spiritual enough. Jesus says something very different. He explains what He came to do. The gospel of Matthew says, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (Matthew 16:21)

Jesus does the saving, not us. He accomplishes that salvation, not through a glorious and mighty act, but through humble and weak means. He takes our sin upon Himself, undergoes the punishment which that sin deserved, and, by dying on the cross, fully pays our debt before God. This is a message that is hard for many people to hear. It was hard for Peter who, upon hearing it, "took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'"

(Matthew 16:22). It is hard for us to accept. It doesn't make sense to us nor does it involve anything on our part. Yet it is what Jesus says salvation is. Are you listening?

Throughout His life, Jesus said many things about how this forgiveness and salvation would be delivered. He spoke of the way into relationship with Him coming through Holy Baptism when He said, "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit." (John 3:5) He spoke of forgiveness being spoken and delivered by His authority given to human beings. To His apostles and those who would follow after Him, He said, "If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven;" (John 20:23). He spoke of forgiveness and strength being given when He said, "'Take and eat; this is my body....This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'" (Matthew 26:26-28)

None of this makes any sense. Water, words, bread, and wine do not seem powerful enough or spiritual enough to initiate faith, grant forgiveness, and strengthen our relationship with God. Yet this is exactly what Jesus says they will do. Are you listening?

There is one problem which mankind has no answer for: death. Jesus says He has the answer. He said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." (John 11:25-26) Putting our faith in a Jewish rabbi who lived 2,000 years ago will somehow will help us live after we die and keep us from ever dying again? How crazy is that? Yet this Jewish rabbi is the Son of God who Himself came back from death and lives now and eternally. He promises to share that life to us. Are you listening?

This Jesus speaks of discipleship and what it means. It is much more than having your name on a church's membership role, showing up occasionally for a worship service, and throwing a couple of your left over dollars in the collection basket. Jesus says, "'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.'" This seems like pretty hard stuff. It's not the "fun"

which many people seek for in a church. Yet Jesus says it is the only way to find life. Are you listening?

The Lord says of THE prophet who would come, "it is to him you shall listen." Why? Some of this can be offensive. Some of this can be hard to accept. Some of this makes no sense to our way of thinking. Some of this has been rejected, not only by the world, but by those claiming to be Christians. We are pressured to reject His words, too. So, why should we listen?

There was a low point in our Lord's ministry when many people felt the same way. The teachings were too hard to take. Some grumbled about them. Many turned their backs on Jesus and left him. It got to the point where Jesus asked his Twelve Disciples, "Do you want to leave, too?" And Peter gave the answer which is still our answer today, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:68)

If you don't want to listen and follow Jesus, who *will* you listen to and follow? Yourself? The religious fad of the week? Your ideas, feelings, and plans change from day to day, as do the spiritual, religious, and material matters in our world. None of them can provide continual joy and lasting hope. Jesus – and Jesus alone - speaks the words that give eternal life – the life He earned by His death; the life He shares with you by His resurrection, beginning now and continuing through life's problems and even through death itself.

Dare to be different! Do not fear authority or reject authority like many in our world do today. Embrace authority – the authority of God's Word spoken through the mouth of Jesus and now spoken by the mouths of the men Jesus calls and sends to speak in His name. His words not only describe what He has but they have the authority and the power to give what they describe, no matter how foolish they seem or how little sense they make. Listen to them! Amen.