

What Love Would Have Us Say
Deuteronomy 18: 15-20 | Mark 1: 21-28
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In the charismatic tradition of my childhood church, the rather extraordinary gift of prophecy was considered an everyday occurrence. It seems strange to think of it now, but it was commonplace for the pastor to single you out, call you up to the front of the church, and say, “God told me to tell you....” whatever.

And it wasn’t just the pastors. The practice was so normalized that we would rarely question when someone claimed to speak for God. And we never interrogated the power dynamic that was established when someone did so.

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At 17 years old, fresh out of high school, I undertook that evangelical rite of passage—the mission trip. Youth and young adults from all over the country had gathered in Garden Valley, Texas, to train together, break off into our respective mission groups, and head out to various parts of the globe to (as we put it) “spread the gospel.”

Despite the many channels available to deliver such a message, God hadn’t found a way to tell me where I should go for such a trip, so I figured I would go to a place I’d always wanted to: Australia.

The trip itself is another sermon series entirely, but suffice it to say that I was a horrible evangelist. I spent much more of my time listening to others share the stories and customs of their faith traditions than I did spreading my own. I got to hear indigenous Australians share the sacred tales and music of their people. I learned about Hinduism in a shopping mall food court. And I even met a Zoroastrian in Darling Harbour on his lunch break!

It seemed that the more energized I was by these cosmopolitan encounters the more exasperated I grew with the provincialism of my own people. By the time we all reconvened in Texas, I was physically and emotionally exhausted. The push to proselytize had taken my faith to its breaking point, and in fact that trip was the beginning of the end of my relationship with evangelicalism. It would even push me away from the Christian faith entirely for a time. I was raw and vulnerable, and in that moment, what I needed most was an affirming word from God that could help me integrate this expanding view of the world.

But what I got instead was this. A young woman, from some other mission group to some other part of the world entirely, came to me during one of our closing worship sessions and said, “God told me to tell you that there’s something you’re hiding from Him.”

Despite my nascent skepticism about the entire Christian project, this young woman and I stepped into these roles like well-worn slippers. She in a prophetic place of power, the very mouthpiece of God. Me, stunned and submissive, primed to receive her words as a divine message.

The spiraling and sleepless agony that followed. I spent weeks haunted by this stranger's words, and went searching every corner of my heart for something, anything, that I must have been hiding from God. (I can't tell you what that does to a queer youth who is still a few years away from understanding that about themselves.) The more I searched, the larger this ominous mystery grew until my anxiety overwhelmed my sense of embarrassment and I went to my youth pastor for help.

At that time my youth pastor was Mrs. Lisa, a plain-spoken, straight-shootin' saint among women. In a part-tirade, part-confession, I shared all that had happened on this trip to set me ill at ease, and the warning of this young prophet whom I thought God had used to send me a message.

Without hesitation, Lisa shot back seven words that changed my life: "Ian: if it don't apply, let it fly."

At one of the most vulnerable moments of my faith, of my life even, Lisa reminded me of the God-given agency I have to discern divine wisdom. And to reject those voices that make unjustified claims of prophetic power. Though she didn't dare to make the claim, it was almost as if God had put God's words in Lisa's mouth. She had spoken a life-giving and liberating message to one in desperate need of it.

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I wonder if you've had a similar experience—either the positive or the negative ones I've described. Maybe someone appeared to share just what you needed to hear at just the right moment—like an angel heralding a divine message. Or maybe, even with the best of intentions, someone spoke out of turn and left you reeling.

They don't have to say "Thus sayeth the lord" to leave you wondering what God's will is for your life—or desperately seeking to understand what God might be trying to say to you. It's not usually as dramatic as we charismatics tend to be.

But while the cultural context of my youth almost puts too fine a point on it, this question of who has the power to speak for God—or even to speak into your life—has been a deeply human struggle throughout the ages.

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It's what Moses sought to address in our Hebrew Scripture this morning. Israel is in a vulnerable place. Their great liberator knows he will not make it with them to the promised land. And at several points along the way, leading them was almost too much of a burden even for Moses to

bear. The wilderness journey was a long one. So in a series of final speeches to Israel, he provides some reminders for the road ahead. He reminds them of their obligation to God, of the right way to be in community together, and of what qualities to look for in the leaders who would follow in his stead.

And as we emerge from the last 40—I mean 4—years, Moses' words find us at a similar moment of reorientation. We can see the promised land just beyond the horizon, but we also know that there's still quite a bit of wilderness yet to endure. All around I can hear the church asking, "What does a prophetic witness look like in these days?"

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Some scholars date Deuteronomy prior to the Babylonian exile but following Assyrian domination. Written after the fall of the Assyrian empire, the text boasts a heavy emphasis on weeding out foreign influence and committing to the exclusive worship of Israel's God alone. Ironically, the book's structure is lifted entirely from an Assyrian vassal treaty – a style of writing by which occupied communities would proclaim their allegiance to (and love for) the Assyrian king. Written in this way, Deuteronomy's style itself conveys a message—that the devotion required by Yahweh is greater than any petty tyrant could ever dream of.

In fact, this the book where Moses says that we are to "love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (6:5). And Bible scholar David Carr says that even these English words "are a pale reflection of the Hebrew." Love here is closer to a total dedication of one's "life strength"—"loyalty and devotion to one far more powerful than one's self."

Jesus would go on to quote this is the greatest commandment of all. And he paired this passage with one "like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Indeed "On these two commandments" Christ says, "hang all the law and the prophets."

So as Christians we come to our reading of the Scripture through this lens. We pattern nothing less than our very lives after this wisdom. We seek to love—to devote our very "life strength"—to God. And in the same likeness we are to love others even as we love ourselves. Love of God. Love of neighbor. Love of self. Love, love, love.

So if in our reading of today's text we listen to Moses—in whom the prophetic tradition and the law itself is rooted. And if we listen to Jesus—who roots himself squarely in the prophetic tradition and in whom the law itself is fulfilled. It is clear that those who would claim prophetic power must speak only the words that LOVE has put in their mouths.

And much like Lisa did for me, Moses reframes the power relations of the prophetic—empowering God's people to discern what is (and what is not) prophetic.

It is not an easy task, no more today than in Moses' time or the time of these Deuteronomistic authors—to remain attentive to what love is saying in our midst.

But there is wisdom here to guide us, if only we will open our hearts to receive it.

First, love is proximate to the people. No less than two times in this small passage Moses affirms that love's prophetic message to a people emerges from among the people. And in Christ's incarnation we find no greater witness to this truth of divine love. God became flesh and dwell among us. To journey with us. To draw our attention to those most in need around us. This is why Christ likens this first commandment to love God with the command to love our neighbor.

Secondly: love is fiercely committed to truth. In the verses immediately following today's passage, Moses says that to know if God has spoken we must test a prophet's words what is true. For a people to live into what is possible, they must first reckon with what is. As Amanda Gorman said at the inauguration, "being American is more than a pride we inherit, it's the past we step into and how we repair it." We might say the same of being prophetic Christians, too.

And finally: love liberates. In taking on the mantle of the prophetic tradition, Jesus said that the Spirit came upon him "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And this very same Spirit is the one that empowers us, church. To be prophetic is to step out and proclaim the world love would have us build together.

So may the words of our mouths be the overflow of hearts filled with love. And before we speak may we know the needs of our people, root ourselves in what is true, and commit to that which gives life and hope to those who seek to be free—no matter the cost.

If we do this, we may very well step into the power of the prophetic. We might say would love would have us say, do what love would have us do, and live into the world love proclaims is possible.

Amen.