

**SLD02.01.15 4<sup>th</sup> Ordinary**  
**Deuteronomy 18:15-28**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **Where Have All the Prophets Gone?**

Today's sermon text is **Deuteronomy 18:15-28**.

Moses and his people have finally arrived at the shore of the Jordan River, on the other side of which is Canaan, The Promised Land. Only, on account of the events back at Horeb, Moses doesn't get to cross over with them.

Horeb is another name for Sinai, where Moses brought down the ten commandments. But it's what happened after that that disqualified Moses. You see, for years God has been faithfully leading the Israelites through all manner of misery and wilderness via a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. But when they set off from Mt. Horeb toward the hill country of the Amorites, they get scared. The Amorites are big and mean and scary and well-fortified, and the people just can't really see the point in having escaped from slavery and trekked all this way from Egypt just to get plowed over by the Amorites. So they refused to enter the hill country and fight them.

This makes God really mad. So God announces that not a single one of this generation of Israelites, not even Moses, is going to be allowed to cross over to the promised land. (Except this one guy named Caleb, who's not featured in today's story.) But besides Caleb, none of this generation will be allowed to cross to Canaan. Their *kids* can, but none of the grown-ups.

The Israelites say, 'well, okay, we're sorry; we'll fight the Amorites,' and then they do. Only by this point God has already withdrawn from them so they get roundly whooped. God then further expresses displeasure by sending them *back* out into the

desert to wander around for *another* 40 years until this whole generation of rebellious warriors has died off.

At this point in Deuteronomy, the next generation, plus Moses, have finally made back to Jordan's shore, at which point Moses commences to review for his people the statutes and commandments without which they will not flourish in their new land. By the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter, he's already covered a lot of ground: what to eat, how to tithe, bathe and worship, how to deal with pagan shrines, and so forth. But by the time he gets to today's passage, his goal is to assure his people that even though he personally won't get to cross the Jordan with them...

### **Deuteronomy 18:15-28**

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This 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.'

Then the Lord replied to me: 'They are right in what they have said. I 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. 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.'

You may say to yourself, 'How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?'

If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it. The word of the Lord.

In case you ever wondered whence came the professional class of Judeo-Christian priest and prophets, it was back at Mt. Horeb when the people got too anxious to deal with the Divine directly. 'If I hear the voice of the Lord my God anymore,' they said, "or ever again see this great fire, I will die." And so the Lord raised up Moses from

among them to traffic with the voice and fire of God on behalf of the people, and to speak the Word of the Lord to them. The people of God would be accountable to the Ordained One, would hang on their every word and obey him.

...or her. Those were the days....

However, in case Moses gets too uppity and imagines he's irreplaceable, God explains in today's text that since Moses won't be crossing over, God will raise up *another* prophet from among the people to do the divine dirty work (whom we know will be Joshua.)

Which teaches us that, no matter how great that leader's been, when that one dies or retires or gets burnt out, God'll raise up another one,. I mean, who, in the world of prophets, has a higher profile than Moses? Listen to this from the last chapter of Deuteronomy: "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" ([34:10](#))." Not only does Moses perform great signs and wonders in Egypt in securing the liberation of the Hebrews, he also serves regularly as the mediator between God and the people."<sup>1</sup> But, hey, Moses dies – too bad, so sad – and God promptly raises up Joshua to take care of business. God is forever raising up prophets from among the people.

Once Moses is out of the picture, God ordains Joshua to lead the Israelites across the Jordan, not because he's holier than anybody else, or smarter, or more competent or courageous, but because, with God's help, he'll be adequate to the task. Therefore God ordains Joshua to *the function* of river-crossing.

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration. 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany. Theological Perspective, David Forney.

I use the language 'ordained to function' intentionally. Some of you will recognize this language from our own Book of Order as it applies to the ordaining of teaching and ruling elders. We in the Reformed tradition ordain to *function*, to a role, to the task at hand, not to some higher order of spiritual attainment. For many of us, knowing ourselves too well to pull the holiness card, this is a relief. For some of us, in the face of others projecting higher standards expectation upon us, this is our defense. As I am forever reminding my coven of pagan sisters, I was *ordained*, not *canonized*. I was called by God, the Presbytery and this church to do a *job*, to be a Minister of Word and Sacrament, and to pastor this church, and I do it the best I can. But I'll swear if I want to.

It's a habit of us ministers to compare ourselves to high profile prophets of the Hebrew scriptures. And in some ways we do well resemble Moses. For example, when we resist what God asks of us, or grumble about our inadequacies, or require divine signs before inciting action, or say things that comes across as strange and confusing at first,<sup>2</sup> until you take the durn sermons home and read them over three or four times. Few of us have ever actually murdered a man but surely most of us, at one time or another, have wished we could have.

Yes, we preachers have a great deal in common with Moses. To the point that some of us might even imagine that we are irreplaceable. Ha! Not even Moses was irreplaceable. Why, Joshua takes over before Moses is hardly cold in the ground. God is forever raising up prophets from among the people.

But what about today? Where are all the prophets today?

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Pastoral Perspective, Verity A. Jones.

Well, you got your big screen, high profile, modern-day prophets like *Gandhi, Bonhoeffer, Abraham Heschel, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Dalai Lama* – each of us could make our own lists of renown and rousing ones who live and work effectively from some creative liminal space between the inescapably harsh realities of this world and how they envision the world *should* be. *And* then get people to do something about it. **For are not deeds as prophetic as words?**

But we don't have to look at the big screen for the prophets God raises up from among the people today. Many of us know Ed Loring, as archetypal an Old Testament prophet as anyone I know, because, much as I love him, he's loud and angry and generally a social pain in the butt. You should have heard him a couple weeks ago at the much anticipated debut of Johnson C. Smith Seminary's new vision. After current PC(USA) moderator, Heith Rasa's very sincere if marginally saccharin speech, ole' outraged Ed stood with an overwhelming urge need to stick up for the all African Americans in the room, where was, of course, most people there since Johnson C. Smith is an African American seminary. By the time he finished, Ed left all our mouths hanging open. Still, I hugged him afterwards because Ed says what needs saying, even if most of us don't want to hear it and most of the time wish he'd just shut up.

Where have all the prophets gone today? Why, they're in the streets and soup kitchens, in community centers and classrooms, at DFACS, and Juvie, and Genesis Shelter, and the Grady clinic, anywhere where people face life harsh realities and do something about them. But really, we don't need to look even *that* far afield for today's prophets.

The meaning of the Hebrew root for prophet is uncertain but most likely it's the "one who is called" or the "one who calls." But what if it's *both*: the "one who is called" AND the "one who calls." Then I read 'prophet' as the one who faces the harsh realities of the world, listens for the word of God, does their best to embody it, and inspires others to do the same.

How can we know a prophet? In today's text, the Israelites ask the same thing: "How can we recognize a word that the Lord has spoken, or not spoken?" God replies, 'if a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken.'

One way of understanding this might simply be that actions speak louder than words. If a person flaps her lips a lot about what God wants or expects or demands but never does anything about it, if somebody can't stop letting everybody else know what *they* ought to do but doesn't themselves join in the fray, looks like the word of the Lord has *not* been spoken.

On the other hand, when somebody looks around at the world, listens for the Word of God, and responds to it with their heart and hands, and then inspires others to do the same, why, surely this is a word that the Lord has spoken.

Which means, at least in this church, that the person sitting next to you is, likely as not, a prophet. Because each of us in this church is called by God – you know how our covenant goes:

God creates and calls us ...to inspire each other to prayer, study, and stewardship; to cultivate an open, caring church; to minister faithfully to the poor, lonely, sick, and those in need; to seek justice and healing in the church, community and world,

as best we can. Regardless of who's populating the pulpit or active on Session at the moment or leading the Stewardship Campaign, this covenant is what binds us together here at Emory Church, the promise to which we hold one another accountable.

This, at our best, is what and who we are, a community of accountability, to God, to one another, and to our community. At our worst, of course, we're just bozos on the same bus as everybody else. But at our best, we in this church are prophets committed to this community of accountability in which we challenge and inspire and sustain one another; and foul up, and fail, and forgive one another, as we stumble together along the rocky path of discipleship.

But whenever you and I look around, and listen for the word of God, and hear its challenge strongly and clearly enough to get up off our duff and do something about it, and inspire one another to do the same, whenever we make even a stab at living and working out of that liminal space between the very harsh, and often overwhelming, realities of this world, and how God imagines the world *should* be, why, then, we are prophets, too.

'Course, some people would call us fools. But I prefer the moniker, 'prophets,' don't you?

God is forever raising up prophets from among the people. I can't resist naming a few examples from our own communion: like, Ray with the Decatur Emergency Assistance Ministry; or Kathryn, Caroline, Etta, Molly, Ray, Mary, Georgette, and others with the Clifton Night Shelter; like Bill and Lilabet organizing and leading us through the MLK weekend service project; or Karen, who keeps galvanizing us to piece together another Madhouser hut; or Tom, who coordinates us each year to churn out several

hundred CHOA meal bags, with Carolyn and Ray and Mary shopping for them, and our Muslim friends joining, as we assemble the bags during Lent, and pray over them, and send them on to the families of the sick kids at Children's Hospital with the genuine hope of being a blessing to our community whoever they are, and whatever they believe.

Please notice, incidentally, how often Ray and Mary's names come up? In case you don't know it, y'all rock as prophets.

So where have all the prophets gone? As long as we keep listening for God's word, and acting upon it; as long as we keep inspiring one another to prayer, study, and stewardship; as long as we cultivate an open, caring church; and minister faithfully to those in need; and seek justice and healing and hope in the world, why, we're surrounded by them!

To the glory of God. Amen.