

"God, the Prophet, and the People"
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
Lectionary Year B
January 29, 2012
Text: Deuteronomy 18:15-20
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I want us to focus our attention this morning on our passage of scripture from Deuteronomy. As you know, Deuteronomy represents the official law book for ancient Israel. In this passage, the writers of the book, the so-called deuteronomists, are setting forth legislation with regard to perhaps the most controversial of Israel's public leaders, the prophet. It has been suggested that the deuteronomists viewed the prophetic mission with some misgivings, since the main concern of the authors of this Old Testament book was to create and impose a uniform Mosaic Torah.

The problem is that prophets were spontaneous, thus uncontrollable, and for control-freaks like the deuteronomists, that made the prophets suspect at best and perhaps even dangerous. Yet the keepers of the law could not deny that in Israel's tradition, it was the prophets and the prophets alone who consistently upheld what was the deuteronomists' primary goal, that the nation of Israel should worship the Lord alone as God [Clements, *NIB*, Vol. II, p. 429].

We, like the writers of Deuteronomy, are somewhat suspicious of those who call themselves prophets, and we should be. After all, the prophet claims to speak for God, and that ought to make us at least a little nervous. How do we decide who is delivering an authentic word from God? That is the real question. And what are we, as the people of God, to do with the words of the prophet? The deuteronomists were determined not to try to limit or control God in this regard. Nevertheless, they were concerned to set forth at least some guidelines as to what might be considered the legitimate role of the prophet with respect to God and the people.

We can analyze what is stated in this passage by looking at the three characters in the drama of speaking and hearing God's word. First there is God himself. He has a role to play for sure. Then there is the role of the prophet whom God raises up. It is extremely important to note what the prophet is and is not to do in speaking for God. Finally there is the role of the people for whom God raises up the prophet. There are some things we need to notice about aspects of the people's role also, because that's the part that hits closest to home. So let's take a few moments and be attentive to each of these roles [Brueggemann et al, pp. 126-7].

First and foremost we need to ask the question: "What is God's role when it comes to the prophet?" God raises up and authorizes the

prophet in response to the people's request. As the passage from Deuteronomy suggests, the people seem to understand the need for a mediator between God and them. And God not only raises up the prophet, the Lord puts the words in the mouth of the prophet. God appoints the prophet to speak to the people on behalf of God.

That means that *the prophet must be of God*. There is no such thing as a self-designated prophet. It also means that *the prophet God raises up may be more to God's liking than to ours*. The passage from Deuteronomy maintains that the prophet should be like Moses. He is the "me" and the "you" referred to here. And we know from looking at passages from Exodus that Moses was not always and altogether in good standing with the people. And if you read the accounts of the prophets later in the Old Testament, you will see that they were not always held in high esteem. Oftentimes the people hated to hear what the prophets had to say and hated the prophets as a result. To be prophetic is not necessarily to be popular.

I ask you to think for a moment about the incredible trust God demonstrates in choosing to raise up and speak through a prophet. The Old Testament prophets weren't perfect people. They were flawed individuals, every one of them. Yet the Lord uses them as instruments of his purposes. He uses them to help the people understand the will of God. He uses them to instruct and guide the people toward being a

community of faith that will reflect the very nature and character of God himself. This is the role of God with respect to the prophet.

What is the prophet's own role? We already have seen that the prophet must be of God and be like Moses. But the prophet must possess another important characteristic as well. *The prophet must be from among the people.* What that says to me is that the authentic prophet of God must be real and relevant, not phony or out of touch. The prophet speaks from within the community of faith, so the prophet must be down-to-earth.

The prophet is not to think of himself or herself as better than the rest of the people; the prophet can't have a holier-than-thou attitude. And the people must not put the prophet up on a pedestal either. The prophet must have enough life experience to be able to empathize with people and have compassion for them. The prophet may be called upon to speak a word of judgment from God, helping the people to realize what is unjust and unrighteous about the way they are choosing to live, but the prophet must not be judgmental or condescending. In other words, the prophet must be open, accessible, and easy to relate to.

But notice as well that *the prophet is held accountable to God,* perhaps even to a greater degree than the people. The prophet is not to speak in the name of other gods. That means to me that the

prophet is not allowed to speak in the name of the god of prosperity. The prophet avoids a gospel of health and wealth. The prophet is not allowed to speak in the name of the god of worldly power and might. The prophet avoids a gospel that is nothing more than fanatic nationalism. The prophet steers clear of a strictly positive "feel good" gospel that does not deal seriously with the problem of pain and suffering. And the prophet is not allowed to speak in the name of the god of prejudice and partiality. The prophet avoids a gospel that shows favoritism toward one group of people and seeks to exclude others. This is the role of the prophet with respect to God and the people.

That leaves us with the role of the people. What are they to do when they hear an authentic word of God from a genuine prophet? Before we answer that question we need to observe the fact that *the people are to want to hear a word of God through the prophet*. The people in Moses' day requested a prophet, which means that they desired such a person to speak for God. Being able to hear the prophetic word of God requires a willingness to listen and an openness to appropriate what is said.

The people must also be able to discern the true prophet from the false one, and that is not always an easy thing to do. But if we let what is stated in this passage serve as a guide to such discernment, we

can spot the genuine article by deciding whether or not the person is real and relevant and seeking to speak for God and not merely for himself or herself. Is the prophet someone you can relate to, and does what she or he is saying appear to be not only biblical but logical and true to your own experience?

And the people must never forget that it is God and only God who raises up the prophet. The people don't get to do that. That is God's job. If we are honest enough to admit it, if it were up to us to raise up prophets, they would wind up speaking the word *of us*, our word, and not necessarily the word *of God*. We would want the prophet's words to reflect our values, our issues, our priorities, our preferences, our viewpoints, and our schedules. The prophet would be in sync with our ideology. The prophet would address our agenda alone. *Our* will be done. That's what we would make sure the prophet preached. We would never choose to be challenged, to be poked and prodded, to be confronted, and to be stretched. We prefer the status quo, for things to remain just as they are.

The passage makes clear what the role of the people ultimately is with respect to God and the prophet. *The role of the people is to heed the word of God spoken by the prophet.* If God has raised up the prophet, and the prophet is like Moses and from among the people, then the people better pay attention and do what the prophet says to

do. *There is accountability when it comes to the people as well as to the prophet.* If the prophet fails to speak the word of God and speaks some other word, he or she runs the risk of death of some sort, spiritual and emotional if not physical. If the people fail to heed the word of the prophet, there will be dire consequences as well. Those consequences come as a natural result of intentionally seeking to live outside the will of God. That is not where we want to go.

So in accordance with what is stated in this passage, I really have no choice but to consider myself to be a prophet of God. Believe me when I say that I didn't ask for the job. I hasten to add that I feel a considerable amount of discomfort in assuming that role, but I do so because I sincerely believe that God has raised me up from among God's people. I, like Moses and all God's messengers, am not perfect. I am flawed in several ways. I am just like every other person. I have made many if not all of the mistakes others have made, so I fully know what it means to make inappropriate choices, to fall far short of the glory of God, to sin.

Yet, for some unknown reason, God continues to use me in spite of myself to speak what I firmly believe is an authentic and genuine word of God, a word that is real and relevant. So when I preach, when I speak what I hear is the word of God out of scripture and with consideration for reason, experience, and tradition, *I primarily am*

preaching to myself as less of the Christian God wants me to be. And if what I have to say to myself benefits you in some way as well, then that is even better.

So I can, in all sincerity and faithfulness, ask you to be attentive and to heed what I say from week to week. I ask you to do so for no other reason than my conviction that what I have to say most likely is what God wants for me as well as for you. Having said that, I make you this promise: If God will continue to speak to and through me, if I will continue to try to be as faithful a witness to God's word as I can be, and if you will continue to attempt to put into practice what I am sharing with you from God, I firmly believe God will bless us richly as God always has done with people who earnestly are seeking to do his will. I believe God will strengthen and sustain us as a vital community of faith, the church.