

“Pay Attention to the Prophet”

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28

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From the Pulpit

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The 25th and final sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, on the Annual Congregational Meeting Sunday of First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 28, 2024, Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, dedicated to Susan Sitler who has journeyed with me through 39 years of ministry, to my four children and their partners/spouses, our seven grandchildren, to my mother Lorene K. Ahrens, to Shira Danielle Kellner, to Dr. Greg Halbe who served faithfully and well as our 2023 Moderator, to our 2023 Church Council and all our elected and appointed leaders, to all my colleagues on the First Church staff, to “all the members who are ministers” in our congregation & always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.
Amen.*

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Moses pulls us onto the prophets’ pathway today in Deuteronomy 18:15-20. As Moses is aging and preparing to transition from leader of God’s chosen people on Earth to God’s angel in glory, he tells his people that God will raise up a prophet among them and they must pay attention to the prophet of God. He makes us all look at and deal with the prophets who are coming. They will be greater than kings in Israel because the prophets take their instructions directly from God and answer directly to God. The prophets who

are coming will not be the accidental or simple intrusions in their communal life. The prophet's voice – though demanding and discomfiting – is one which they must heed and follow. The prophets will come to show them how to follow God's covenants, commandments and promises from Mt. Sinai. Again, they might not always like it, but people are clearly told, **“You must heed the prophet.”** In ancient times and in this present moment, everyone must pay attention to the prophets.

How will we know these prophets? What do they look like? What do they sound like? In his classic Biblical reflection, simply entitled, *The Prophets*, Abraham Joshua Heschel begins with these words:

“What manner of man is the prophet? A student of philosophy who turns from the discourses of great metaphysicians to the orations of the prophets may feel as if he was going from the realm of the sublime to an area of trivialities. Instead of dealing with timeless issues of being and becoming, of matter and form, of definitions and demonstrations, he is thrown into orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the marketplace. Instead of showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind, the prophets take us to the slums (to the hovels of humanity). The world is a proud place, full of beauty, but the prophets are scandalized and rave as if the whole world were a slum. They make much ado about paltry things, lavishing excessive language upon trifling subjects.

So what, if somewhere in ancient Palestine poor people have not been treated properly by the rich?... (which is clearly an injustice). To us, (this) injustice is injurious to the welfare of people, to the prophets, it is a deathblow to existence; to us an episode, to them a catastrophe. A threat to the world. Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysteria.... The prophet is a man who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned at man's fierce greed....

Prophecy is the voice God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world.... God is raging in the prophet's words.”

(Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, January 2007 (original 1962), pp. 3, 4, 5).

Moses led, taught and prophesied with authority. In Deuteronomy 18:15-20, he introduces us to the “evil twin” of authority – which is **idolatry**. Moses tells us that some prophets become witnesses and lead the worship of idols. They become seduced by the world’s desire to make their prophecies fit the leader of the day or the ruling party of the times. We know these to be False prophets. False prophets come and seduce people with words they love to hear, with promises to follow other gods – richer gods, prettier gods, easier gods. But, truthfully – anyone who seeks to tone down God’s word, compromise God, or scuttle the Covenant of God’s promise is in deep trouble. The seduction of yielding to false messages, to follow “Other” gods who are less demanding leads to the death of false prophets.

Let’s face it, the nature of the church is that **we must HOST the prophetic/ Mosaic Word in all its frightening honesty**. That Word is often a hard one, and so both prophet and people may wish for a much more palatable word. There is a temptation in all of us to tone down something which makes us uncomfortable, or ask the wrong questions about Truth that comes our way or challenges the group around us, but to silence the speaker or distort the prophet’s word risks breaking the covenantal ethic of which we are apart. One who teaches and speaks prophetic truth **with authority** does not candy-coat the truth.

One true prophet in our times is Matthew Desmond. In his 2023 book, *Poverty, By America*, Desmond lays bear the truth we are too apt to dismiss and hide from. The United States, the richest country on earth, has more poverty than any other advanced democracy. We allow one in eight children to go without basic necessities, millions of men, women and children to die on our streets and authorize corporations to pay poverty wages. “Why is this so?” asks Desmond. He tells his story through personal witnessing stories of those in poverty and statistics that do not lie. He gives us ways

of thinking about a morally urgent question and calls us imagine solutions – including becoming **poverty abolitionists** – engaging in the politics of collective belonging, to usher in a new age of shared prosperity and, at last, true freedom. This book’s call to abolish poverty in America is prophetic imagination at its best. There is no candy coating here. We all need to read it and study it together. I will teach this book next – after Thurman’s *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

We see this “non-candy-coating” prophetic word come alive in Mark 1:21-28. Jesus is faithfully attending synagogue on the Sabbath, and he is teaching those gathered – religious experts and the people of God gathered there – in a way that is so impressive that it conveys authority. You might say his teaching “carries weight.” Mark, unlike Luke (recounting a similar scene in Nazareth), or Matthew (with the Sermon on the Mount), doesn’t tell us *what* Jesus says, but seems to care more about telling us just *how* powerfully he teaches.

Jesus teaches with “authority” according to Mark. The word “authority,” of course, has more than one meaning. Even a corrupt judge or corrupt police officer has “authority.” But the simplest, poorest person in the world can speak with a different kind of “authority” if they embody wisdom and integrity that others find compelling. Each one holds a different kind of power, one from the outside, and the other from *within*.

The Scribes (those teaching around Jesus) sound authoritative because they can cite chapter and verse of the Torah (the five books which open our Bible). Even today, scholars and preachers back up what they say in much the same way, citing Scripture and the scholarship that surrounds it.

When Jesus, the carpenter from dusty little Nazareth (Can anything good come from Nazareth?) walks into the synagogue and speaks in a way that “astounded” the people, more than one person must sense trouble brewing. “Who is this man?” they must wonder, where did he go to school, what are his credentials, and who gave him the right to speak this way? Scholars seem to disagree on whether the reaction is positive or mixed; perhaps some love

what they hear, and others are disturbed by it. In any case, this is no ordinary “Saturday at the Synagogue.”

And “**just then**” (an expression Mark loves because it builds suspense), things get even more extraordinary, when Jesus’ teaching in words becomes teaching in action. A man tortured by and in bondage to an “unclean spirit” emerges from the crowd, right in the midst of the commotion over Jesus’ power-filled teaching. Ironically, while others are full of questions about Jesus, this evil spirit is the only one who recognizes who Jesus actually is, his true identity. He yells, “**you are the Holy One of God!**” It is as if radical evil has a way of immediately discerning the presence of good. Jesus commands the spirit to be quiet (perhaps to protect his identity so early in his ministry?) and then Jesus expels the spirit from the man, freeing him from his terrible enslavement to evil.

We never hear another word about this man. But the whole region hears about what has happened to him because of this amazing teacher. Jesus has backed up his words, and his powerful preaching, with an action that illustrates what he is “about.” This is a **NEW** teaching – with authority.

His authority is something other than credibility or reliability. He speaks directly to the “unclean spirit” and the unclean spirit leaves the man. Here is a very different kind of teacher. This is not about quoting scripture, or reading from a textbook in a way that makes it come alive. Jesus pulls from a power source beyond knowledge and wisdom. Jesus calls from a power source which is fueled by the Holy Spirit and God’s amazing grace. **Jesus speaks truth with love.**

It is easy for us to get tangled up in the drama of the exorcism of an unclean spirit. Everyone loves a great exorcism! But the real issue here is the power with which Jesus speaks and acts. He is able to differentiate the spirit of good and evil and see what needs to be changed and what needs to be preserved. The Spirit goes and the man continues to live – free of the burdens of the spirit.

We are hungering today for the spirit and the power of Jesus. From classroom to classroom, from churches, synagogues and mosques, from street to street, we need the presence of those who **speak truth with love to power** – whether that power is an unclean spirit moving in our midst or a leader who spews hate and disdain for others, we need to address the unclean spirits of our times. We need to purge unclean spirits – following the way of Moses, the prophets of old and Jesus.

We need to pay attention to the new prophets – like Matthew Desmond. We need to start a new abolitionist movement – one that ends poverty in America. Truth spoken in love will advance God’s healing presence in this world. Teaching with Authority will transform lives. Let us be the ones who teach with authority – always and everywhere in the spirit of love – and then people will pay attention to us because we are becoming God’s vanguard of hope. Amen.

