

"Authority"
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
28 January 2024
Trinity+St. Peter's Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
I Corinthians 8:1-13
Saint Mark 1:21-28

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Authority

On a Sunday following a brief discussion about the Creeds, and their role in the Church, the readings for this Sunday follow that discussion with some talk about authority. It seems appropriate especially on the Sunday of our Annual Meeting. Diana Butler Bass tells the story of seminary students, who when asked whom they might turn to when having an ethical or spiritual concern, answered that they relied in people with whom they had a relationship, or the media, or the Internet. It is a different time for those who follow Christ, or who have any kind of religious life. The old authority seems to have drifted away. In two of our readings, the first from Deuteronomy, and in the Gospel, we have references to authority. The reading from the Hebrew Scriptures recognizes prophets as having the voice of God, and in the Gospel, the hearers in the synagogue are amazed at Jesus' authority. The question for us is how do we either make a place or maintain a place for such authority in our private spiritual lives, and in our spiritual life as a community.

We have just come through (no, we're still experiencing and coping with it) a period of attraction in our society to authoritarianism. And we need to ask what are the marks of authority that we can really trust? Bass has something to say about this.

"Practicing what one preaches is a mark of spiritual truth, and humanity and humility foster trust. Although certain people will always hanker for authoritarian or charismatic leaders, there is a much broader longing for authentic leaders in these times — those whose message and actions validate their deepest beliefs. In the emerging spiritual culture, what matters much less than who is sharing the news, and the messenger has become the message."

She goes on to further define the problem and the observation of the role of authority in lives of faith.

" Thus, religious organizations, ordained leaders, and conventional creeds recede in importance as mediators in favor of direct friendship with God through prayer and discernment as means to spiritual understanding. Friendship with God can be mystical and individual, but it is also communal

and corporate—every major faith asserts that friendship with God is strengthened through friendship with our neighbor.”

Her thoughts here relate in many ways to an old authority, one that Jesus cites in his conversation with the lawyer – the recognition of the central law (actually a creed) about loving God, neighbor, and self. The authority in Deuteronomy is one that recognizes a fundamental relationship with God in the Covenant and the prophets. We might ask in the individualism, and in the community that Bass makes mention of, who are our prophets? Who is it that speaks with the voice of God in our midst? There are so many candidates, and Bass gives us a measure of their possible worth. She thinks that such prophets and religious or political leaders are those “whose message and actions validate their deepest beliefs.” Discernment seems to be the order of the day.

The Prophets of Choice

On Friday evening we bought tickets at the last minute to the Book of Mormon in New York. It was a baffling experience for me, one that brought a certain level of disappointment and anger, mixed in with scattered moments of laughter. The plot involves two Mormon elders who are assigned to a mission in Uganda in Africa. One of the elders is a model Mormon, full of the culture that the church and his parents formed him in. The other elder is pure comic relief, a young man whose imagination stretches far beyond the authority that the church intended for him to operate in. The “good” Mormon finds that his message intended to attract the Ugandan people in this small village makes absolutely no sense to them, and for the first time in his life he has to deal with failure. The second one, saves the day, as it were, because he defeats the attitudes and questions posed by the village people by trotting out a smattering of contemporary prophets whom he weaves into the stories of the Book of Mormon. It is an interesting list: Moses and Jesus are accompanied by Maroni, Joseph Smith, Yoda, Luke Skywalker, James T. Kirk, Darth Vader, Donald Trump, and (well, you get the picture). It is these latter day prophets whom the villagers find compelling and their role in the plots of countless Star Wars, and Star Trek films is compelling to them.

The imagination of this less than perfect elder and the story he tells addresses in an odd way the problems of AIDS, female circumcision, war lords, and a whole host of local problems. The magic is that he addresses these issues, which the proper elder refuses to even see. The lesson that I wrestled with was one of identifying who it is that we see as prophets in our time, and do they even come to grips with the problems of our society, and the church. In the first reading Moses says to the people, “*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.*” And who just might that be? Joel Osteen, Jimmy Swaggert, Tammy Fae Baker?

And what do we require of our preachers, and teachers? What do we hope that they will say, and what do we desire that they teach us? In ages past, and perhaps even in our own time, attempts to understand God and God’s will were rendered in the reading of entrails, or seeing omens in the flight of birds, or other observations. Here Moses articulates what will become a central understanding of Israel’s relationship with YHWH, and how Israel will hear or understand God’s mind. Moses sets the pattern, and promises that God will provide for another leader “like him.” What will be different is that Israel will have to listen for the words that are spoken to them. The key

part of this new means will be discernment, the ability to detect the false word. Here we need to understand the role of prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. They did not gaze at some crystal ball, but rather listened for God's will and then proclaimed that in human speech for the here and the now. The prophet then is someone in relationship with God, and who is held accountable by God. Do we then require this of our prophets and leaders or do we dismiss their foibles and their weak leadership.

The difference of Jesus

What is striking about the Gospel reading for this morning are two different notions, evident authority, and knowledge. The people in the synagogue are twice characterized by Mark as recognizing Jesus' authority (different than that of the scribes). It's as if a border is being crossed here. There is a new knowledge (experience) of what God is showing forth in the acts of Jesus. This insight is given further recognition in the story about the man with an unclean spirit. There is recognition of Jesus here from the spirit as well. "What have you to do with us?" The spirit's knowledge of Jesus opens up to us another identity of Jesus, the Holy One of God. Mark has a secrecy motif, and thus Jesus demands that the spirit be quiet and to leave the unfortunate man.

The experience of all in the synagogue now begins to revolve around Jesus' authority – an authority over unclean spirits. They are amazed (believe), and they begin to tell the story to others. Here Mark displays what excited them, and moved them to speak, like the prophets. Here Jesus teaches like a prophet, casts out demons, and heals. This is all evidence of a benevolent God (see the Psalm for today), and Mark give us the recollection of a day of redemption and healing.

The whimsy of the imagination driven Mormon elder was wise in that it at least addressed the problems of the community. What it lacked was a continuing effort to discern God's will for the people – most importantly discerning that *with them*. That is what we are called to do if we are to be a prophet people – a prophet church. We need to amaze this community with our presence. In Mark and Luke, the amazement of people is a code word that indicates that they believed. We need to tell them of our own amazement in what God has or has not done for us. The whole thing is a process of living and doing.

Listen to the psalm for today:

*He has shown his people the power of his works *
in giving them the lands of the nations.
The works of his hands are faithfulness and justice; *
all his commandments are sure.
They stand fast for ever and ever, *
because they are done in truth and equity.
He sent redemption to his people;
he commanded his covenant for ever; *
holy and awesome is his Name.*

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; *
those who act accordingly have a good understanding;
his praise endures for ever.*

The Lutheran Church has an interesting phrase that it often uses in connection with its message in the media. It's a phrase that makes a lot of sense to me, and I hope to you as well – *"God's work – Our hands!"* May it be so.

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