

Mark 1:21-28

The Man with an Unclean Spirit

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Mark 1:21-28 The Message

21-22 Then they entered Capernaum. When the Sabbath arrived, Jesus lost no time in getting to the meeting place. He spent the day there teaching. They were surprised at his teaching—so forthright, so confident—not quibbling and quoting like the religion scholars.

23-24 Suddenly, while still in the meeting place, he was interrupted by a man who was deeply disturbed and yelling out, "What business do you have here with us, Jesus? Nazarene! I know what you're up to! You're the Holy One of God, and you've come to destroy us!"

25-26 Jesus shut him up: "Quiet! Get out of him!" The afflicting spirit threw the man into spasms, protesting loudly—and got out.

27-28 Everyone there was incredulous, buzzing with curiosity. "What's going on here? A new teaching that does what it says? He shuts up defiling, demonic spirits and sends them packing!" News of this traveled fast and was soon all over Galilee.

Let's think about God's authority. What it is, who speaks with God's authority and how it plays out in our lives.

- Deuteronomy shows God's authority revealed through the prophets' reliance on the word of God.
- First Corinthians shows God's authority revealed through love as opposed to knowledge.
- Mark witnesses to God's authority revealed through power over death and destruction. In each of these texts, God is the primary agent of revelation, and, at the same time, humans participate in God's revelatory event.

God speaks through prophets to reveal God.

In Deuteronomy 18, we hear God's "words in the mouth of the prophet" (18:18). Here the prophet is a conduit through whom God's word passes. Words that come from God and pass through the prophet to the hearer maintain God's authority.

Through this maintenance of God's authority, the Hebrew Bible claims that the potency of the prophecy was not diminished by passage through a human vessel. **God is the agent** through



whom the word comes and through whom the word is effective. The prophet participates in the revelation of God's authority by speaking the words God has given.

Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 8 that love reveals God's authority. This stands in contrast to the idea that knowledge is the primary means of illumination. Love, in Paul's theology, not knowledge, exemplifies relationship with God. For example, Paul says that eating or not eating the food sacrificed to idols is inconsequential.

- What matters is your behavior based in love. So, eat the food if it is an act of love to eat it; refrain from eating if refraining is the act of love. Choose behaviors that communicate love to God and others. ***It is God who harnesses love to reveal God. Disciples*** participate in the revelation of God when love guides their behaviors.

Jesus spoke **with** authority. People in the temple, and the demonic powers present, noticed this.

God reveals God's authority through power over destructive forces. In the first chapter of Mark, Jesus practices his authority by demonstrating power over the destructive force of the "unclean spirit." Jesus says, "Be silent, and come out of him!" and the unclean spirit obeys. Jesus demonstrates power over destructive forces by freeing the man from the destructive force of the unclean spirit. Mark shows that this demonstrated Jesus' authority by the reaction of the crowd who "kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him'" (1:27). Jesus is the agent of this demonstration of power over the unclean spirit, and humans participate by bearing testimony to Jesus' redemptive actions.

How does God, throughout time, reveal God? How does God reveal God to you, to us?

"How can you tell a true prophet from a false prophet?"

A middle-aged, wise pastor, said to a class he was teaching - when he was young, a self-proclaimed prophet told him and a certain young woman that God wanted them to marry one another and that if they didn't, they would die. "We looked at each other," ... "and we said, 'No, we're not going to get married.' We married other people and both of us are still alive." The whole class laughed.

How can you tell a true prophet from a false prophet? The question that our text from Deuteronomy addresses remains relevant for us today. After Moses -- the pre-eminent prophet -- dies, how will the people know the will of God? They cannot consult sooth-sayers and mediums like the nations around them do, as the passage before this one makes abundantly clear (Deuteronomy 18:9-14). So how will they know who speaks for God?

"The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me (says Moses) from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet" (Deuteronomy 18:15). ***God promises not to abandon the people to their own devices.***

- The promised prophet (singular) was understood to be a person that would come during the messianic age. We believe that to be Jesus.

This eschatological expectation is apparent in a confrontation between John the Baptist and the religious authorities. When John announces the kingdom of God, the priests and Levites



ask him, “Who are you?” and he says, “‘I am not the Messiah.’ And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ He answered, ‘No’ ... They asked him, ‘Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’” (John 1:20-21, 25). When Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, they are not so much representations of the Law and the Prophets as they are the two figures that were expected to appear at the end of the ages, to herald the Messiah.

The issue is not the end of the ages, but the present time, when in the muck and mire of everyday life, the **people need to know who speaks for God.**

Perhaps the question is as relevant for us as it was for those ancient Israelites.

- Who speaks for God? There are lots of people who claim to speak for God today: prosperity preachers, self-help gurus, radio and TV preachers, religious bloggers galore, and even me, a working preacher, who gets up Sunday after Sunday to proclaim God’s Word at Hill Avenue Grace.

Who speaks for God? How do you distinguish between a true prophet and a false prophet? Deuteronomy gives us some guidance. Anyone who speaks in the name of other gods is obviously a false prophet (18:20). But false prophets are usually subtler than that. Anyone who speaks a prophecy that doesn’t come true is a false prophet (18:22). The problem, of course, is that often we need to decide in the moment and can’t wait to see what becomes of the prophet’s (or preacher’s) word.

Prophecy takes time ... and time is challenging in an age when “instant gratification” is the standard.

Still, if we take the larger witness of the Old Testament prophets seriously, there are some other things we can say:

- **The true prophet does not seek to be a prophet.** From Moses’ long protest God’s call in Exodus 3 to Jeremiah’s objection that he is “only a boy” (Jeremiah 1:6), no prophet in the Bible wants to be a prophet. It is something, instead, that they do because they cannot avoid God’s call. When Jeremiah tries to keep silent, he cannot (Jeremiah 20). Even when Elijah runs away, he cannot escape God’s presence (1 Kings 19).
- **The true prophet seeks neither self-promotion nor riches.** Naaman the Syrian is healed of leprosy by Elisha’s word in 2 Kings 5, but Elisha will not accept any payment or gift. Many of the prophets put aside pride and dignity to engage in bizarre sign-acts, walking naked in the streets of Jerusalem (Isaiah 20) or lying prone on the ground for weeks on end (Ezekiel 4).
- **The true prophet speaks God’s word,** not his or her own (Deuteronomy 18:18). Repeatedly, the prophets declare, “Thus says the LORD.” And they most often speak words that are uncomfortable, to say the least -- words of judgment for their own people. True, they also speak words of comfort and hope, but almost always on the



other side of judgment. The prophets are not advocates of the power of positive thinking. Their hope rests on God alone, not on their own power or worth.¹

- **The true prophet bears a “family resemblance” to what has come before.** The prophets speak new words into new situations. “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:18-19). The Holy Spirit moves in new and unexpected ways. Nevertheless, if the prophet’s words contradict what we already know of God from Scripture, then they (and the prophet) should be suspect.
- **The true prophet (and the false prophet) is known by his or her “fruit.”** Jesus warns, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:15-16). Does the prophet (or preacher) lead others to be disciples of Jesus or of themselves? Does his or her preaching lead to repentance and transformation or to complacency and self-absorption?

Who speaks for God? The answer requires personal and corporate discernment and prayer.

Scripture gives us some guidelines, and there are more than what I have mentioned. In all that we do, of course, as we hear and study God’s Word, and as we are given the great privilege and the responsibility to proclaim it ourselves, we must do so with a healthy dose of humility, pointing always to Jesus, our great prophet, priest, and king.

Live in God’s authority, and speak on his behalf, as you journey forward.



