

“The Lord Your God Will Raise Up for You a Prophet”

In the name of him who instructs his people with the words and the authority of God, dear friends in Christ: In today’s Old Testament lesson we hear Moses giving the children of Israel some “last minute” instructions. Really, that’s what the whole book of Deuteronomy is: the final words of Moses, the man who led Israel out of slavery in Egypt and who shepherded them in the desert for forty years. They’ve come to the end of their road together. Encamped on the plains of Moab just east of the Jordan River, the nation of Israel awaits the command of God to begin the conquest of the Promised Land; but Moses can’t go with them. He has been forbidden by God to enter that land flowing with milk and honey. He knows that he is to die out here in the desert. And before he does, he wants to do his best to ensure that the people he’s been leading all these years are set firmly on the right course. He’s led them in God’s way here to the goal; he doesn’t want them to lose their way once they’re in the Promised Land.

And with that in view, in the passages that immediately precede our text, Moses warns the people not to listen to other voices that claim to speak with spiritual authority. He tells them that the land of Canaan is filled with priests and prophets who speak on behalf of false idol gods, and who tell their people to sacrifice their own children by burning them on their unholy altars. Moses also warns them of the spiritists and mediums who claim to be able to communicate with the dead or with wise spirits that can reveal the future and other deep secrets. He says to have nothing to do with those who engage in such things and who claim to have supernatural knowledge. Such things are an abomination to the Lord. And it’s precisely because the Canaanites are doing these things that the land itself is about to vomit them out to make room for God’s people Israel. Implied in this – and stated emphatically elsewhere – is the warning that if the Israelites get involved in these things, the land will puke them out too.

It’s in this context then, that Moses promises God’s people a prophet like unto himself – that is, someone from among their own number, chosen by the Lord, who is authorized to speak in the Lord’s behalf. That’s the voice of spiritual authority you are to listen to. God says, “I will put my words in his mouth, and he will speak to you all that I command.” So what the Lord is saying is that in this sea of conflicting messages you are about to face, in which all kinds of people are claiming to speak with spiritual authority, I will not leave you without the real thing.

And anyone who is familiar with the Old Testament knows this is true. Throughout Israel’s history, the Lord selected certain men and appointed them as his prophets to speak his Word to his people. And just to be sure we all understand the same thing, when we use the word “prophet” we don’t necessarily mean someone who speaks about what’s going to happen in the future. No. A prophet is merely someone who speaks on behalf of someone else – in this case, someone who speaks for God. Not all of the prophets of the Lord were given messages that concerned the future; but all of them *were given* God’s Word to speak to the people of their day. And so, upon Moses’ death, that prophetic office passed to Joshua. He became the Lord’s appointed spokesman. In the years that followed there were other prophets, men like Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, and so on. Usually the Lord had more than one active prophet at any given time; sometimes there were many. But they all with one accord faithfully spoke the Words that God gave them. And make no mistake: they were fallen sinners like everyone else. They had their fears, their weaknesses, their faithless moments, their sins and shortcomings; but when they spoke God’s Word, they spoke the truth just as it was given to them.

The far bigger problem was that God's people very often didn't like to listen to what the Lord had to say through his prophets. Even Moses had to contend with this. You'll remember that he constantly had to deal with the peoples' grumbling and complaints, which, while directed at Moses, almost always had to do with opposing what the Lord told him to say. He also had to face challenges to his authority. On one occasion it came from his own family. His brother Aaron and sister Miriam decided they didn't like playing second fiddle to their younger brother. In their view he was getting all the attention. They wanted their share of the limelight. So they came along saying, "Is Moses the only one who gets to speak for God? Isn't he speaking through us too?" The Lord slammed them down hard. He said to them, in effect, "I don't remember talking to you face to face like I did with Moses on Mount Sinai. *He's* the guy I reveal my Word to plainly. I never did that with you. Just who do you think you are? And why weren't you afraid to speak out against my servant Moses?" On another occasion some 250 well known community leaders of the Israelites stepped forward. They were sick of having to listen to Moses all the time. They said, "Every one of God's people is just as holy and chosen as you are. Who put you in charge? The Lord is with us all. Don't we all get to speak with equal authority?" In answer to their question, the Lord had the ground itself open up its mouth and devour them. I'd take that as a definite no.

But unfortunately, despite such clear examples of the Lord frowning on people ignoring or opposing his appointed prophets, the situation only got worse once the people settled in the Promised Land. Though they were warned to stay away from false spiritual guides and listen only to those appointed to speak God's Word, many of them reversed this. They did listen to the priests and prophets of the false gods and they turned from the Lord to join the Canaanites in worshipping their idols and engaging in their pagan practices. They also sought out the spiritists and mediums who claimed to be able to reveal the future or contact the dead. Others, perhaps the majority, wanted to have it both ways. "Why can't we listen to the Lord *and* to these other voices? We're not turning from the Lord; we just don't think he's got a monopoly on spiritual truth. We want to be able to decide for ourselves what's true and what's not when it comes to spiritual matters." And unfortunately, there arose a lot of false prophets who told these people exactly what they wanted to hear: that they could have it both ways.

Meanwhile, the true prophets of God, with their message of exclusivity – "No, you can't have it both ways, you must listen to the Lord and to him alone" – were decried as being intolerant, judgmental, and overbearing. They were ridiculed, they were shouted down; sometimes they were openly persecuted or put to death. But nevertheless, compelled by the Lord who called and appointed them, they continued to faithfully speak his Word. The Lord's authoritative truth was always there for those who were willing to hear it.

And the same is true in our day. If you are willing to hear it, the voice of the Lord is still speaking through his appointed spokesmen. And yes, in case you hadn't figured it out, I would count myself among their number; but I'm not alone. There are thousands of faithful pastors out there who have been called by God into the prophetic office. And the Lord has put his words in their mouths. So you can be absolutely sure that when any one of them says to you, for example, "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins" or "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" or "Take and eat, this is the true body of Christ given into death for your sin" you are hearing the living and authoritative voice of God.

But I don't need to tell you that there are all kinds of other voices out there that claim to speak with spiritual authority. And just as the Lord told his people Israel not to listen to them, so now also he says the same thing to you. Let me be specific: first, and most obviously, you should not listen to those who teach false religions. And no, I don't mean you can't study these

religions to find out what their adherents believe; but you should not give them any credence. Understand from the start that they're false and that even while they may have certain components that ring true, they're ultimately the pathway to hell. Satan disguises himself as an angel of light to lead the unwary astray. Don't be fooled by him.

Equally as obvious, you should not listen to those who claim to have supernatural knowledge beyond God's Word. Fortune tellers, astrologers, palm readers, crystal ball gazers, psychics, those who claim to be able to conjure up the spirits of the dead; they are at best crooks and conmen and at worst they are people who are in contact with demonic spirits. Either way by dealing with them you lose.

Perhaps less obvious, you are not to give credence to voices that claim to speak for God but cannot support their claim by pointing you to where it's written in sacred Scripture. I'm speaking of teachers who want to tell you about their dreams and visions, their near death experiences by which they claim to have visited heaven or hell, or those who claim to receive direct extra-biblical revelations from God: "Jesus appeared in my study yesterday, and he told me to tell you ... whatever." There's also the more subtle approach that goes, "The Lord laid it on my heart to say this to you ...". Don't listen to them.

But it's more than that. You want to avoid listening to those who claim to be more enlightened than the written Word of God, who place *their* judgment over the Word and want to tell you which parts of the Bible are true and which are myth, or which parts have been superseded by modern developments in science, sociology, or psychology. "Yes, in the past, ignorant people foolishly believed that God created the heavens and the earth in six days, or that these certain practices and proclivities were sinful; but now we know better." Don't buy it.

Alarm bells should also go off when you hear a teacher saying what's become one of the greatest myths of our time: that there is no such thing as spiritual truth or authority, or if there is such as thing as truth out there, you can't know it for sure. "There are only opinions, and one opinion is as good as any other. You have to look into your own heart and discover what's right for you." Hogwash. That's nothing less than to deny that God has spoken and that we can understand what he's said. And it's directing you to listen to your heart which is full of sin and deceit rather than to the authoritative Word of God. You need to be equally wary of those who are willing to compromise biblical truth or combine it with other sources of alleged spiritual authority; who, like the false prophets of old told people what they wanted to hear: that they could have it both ways.

And all this being said, I have to add that if you were to keep from listening to all these voices I've mentioned thus far, you still might not hear the authoritative Word of God when you gather for worship or Bible study. That is to say a preacher can stand before a congregation such as this and proclaim things 100% straight out of the Bible and still fail to faithfully speak for God. How is that possible? It's easy – it's perhaps the most common mistake today's prophets make: they fail to proclaim Christ. I mean, it's absolutely true that David killed Goliath, that God spoke to Moses from a burning bush, that Solomon had 300 wives and 700 concubines, and that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. But filling your head with factoids like that is an utter waste of time if the preacher never gets around to using them to reveal Jesus Christ and him crucified. In one way or another, that's what the whole Bible is about. And the faithful prophet who speaks God's Word will always deliver that message.

Doing that from today's Old Testament lesson is an exercise in simplicity itself, for Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of Moses' prophecy that the Lord would raise up a prophet like himself. You see, all the prophets between Moses and the time of Christ, and all the prophets

that came after the time of Jesus (by which I mean the apostles, pastors, and teachers of the church) were called to speak God's Word. And we are grateful for their faithfulness in doing so. And in that sense, they are like Moses – they spoke for God; but Moses stands in a class by himself. He did things that none of these prophets of God did.

There are three things in particular that make Moses unique. First, he was a mediator, as our text indicates. Recall that when the children of Israel were gathered at the base of Mount Sinai, the glory of God descended on the mountain. It was a terrifying sight. There was fire and smoke. Lightening and thunder caused the ground to tremble. The people stood quaking in fear. But most frightening of all was when the Lord spoke the Ten Commandments to his people. The Israelites cried out to Moses, "If we hear the voice of God anymore we'll die." And that's not an exaggeration. The Law of God is meant to kill sinners. No one can hear his perfect standards and stand upright before him. So the people begged Moses, "You go up on the mountain alone and then come back and tell us what God told you." And the Lord allowed it. He said, "They are right in what they have spoken. You will be their representative before me, and you will represent me to them."

Second, Moses was an intercessor. When Moses was on the mountain receiving God's Word, the people below rebelled by worshipping the golden calf they'd made. The Lord was furious. He told Moses, "Step aside. I've had it with them. I'm going to destroy them all. I will start over again making a great nation of you." But Moses pleaded with the Lord not to do it. He said, "Remember the promises you made to their fathers. For the sake of your name, relent of this judgment; and if not, take my life in exchange for theirs." It was a bold and selfless thing to do; but it caused the Lord to withhold his judgment against them.

And finally, Moses was a deliverer. When the children of Israel were in slavery, weak, oppressed, and powerless to do anything to secure their freedom, Moses was the man who went head to head with the Pharaoh of Egypt. It was through him that the Lord worked the mighty miracles of salvation, ultimately bringing God's people out of cruel bondage by the blood of the lambs and the death of Egypt's firstborn.

The thing to see is all these functions are fulfilled in an even greater sense by Jesus. First, he is our mediator with God. He alone can stand before the Lord as a man in sinless perfection, representing us to his heavenly Father, and at the same time, because he is true God, he can most accurately represent God to us. Second, he is our intercessor: not just pleading our case and offering to surrender his life on our behalf; but actually doing it – giving his sinless life as the atoning sacrifice for our sin – letting the wrath of God fall upon him to secure our forgiveness. And finally, he is our deliverer, freeing us not just from temporal slavery; but from death, hell, and eternal damnation. How? By working for us the miracles of salvation, by giving himself as the Lamb of God whose blood marks and protects us, and by dying as God's firstborn and only begotten Son. He more than any other is the prophet like Moses the Lord God promised to raise up for us. And raise him up he did. He raised him up to speak his Word with authority. He raised him up on the cross to redeem us from sin. He raised him up from the dead to declare our forgiveness. And he raised him up to the right hand of his glory where he is exalted on high. Therefore, he is the One we are to be listening to so that we don't lose our way.

May we be given the grace and wisdom to do so, from now until he comes again in glory. In Jesus name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!