

(Deuteronomy 18:15-22 NRSV) ¹⁵ The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶ This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." ¹⁷ Then the Lord replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. ¹⁹ Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰ But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak--that prophet shall die." ²¹ You may say to yourself, "How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?" ²² If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.

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The Truth Isn't that Hard to Figure Out

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Deuteronomy 18:15-22

The people want to know how you can tell if you are listening to a real prophet, or just someone who claims to be. They want to know how you can tell that someone who claims to represent the word of God really is.

The Israelites are in the wilderness. But much of their journey is already behind them. They are coming close to promised land. We find the Israelites this morning where their wandering is nearly over, and now they are in that long and complete section of the journey to freedom where they are given all the rules and regulations and directions on how to live. Lost in the wilderness is only marginally about geography. It is about losing and finding your way in full scope of human being. And at this point the Israelites are putting the pieces together for continuing their lives in the land God has promised them.

This section of Deuteronomy, 24 chapters and hundreds of verses long, is essentially Israel's constitution. The ten commandments start it off, but they are but the tip of the iceberg. The full covenant is laid out in these chapters. It covers warnings about backsliding, guidelines for counteracting sedition, and how to avoid various forms of defilement. It gives the mandate and outline for the sabbatical year, which comes every seven years when all debts are forgiven. This idea has been in the news lately regarding the suggestion that wealthy nations, like the United States, forgive foreign loans to poor countries. This section of Deuteronomy also tells how to keep the religious festivals and how to administer justice. It gives guidelines for kingship and priesthood and rules about adultery. It even gives complete instructions on how to dispose of a criminal's corpse. Deuteronomy, or at least most of it, is a handbook to prepare the people to take up their citizenship.

And right in the middle of this important handbook, the office of prophet is taken up. Sometimes I think we get the idea that Old Testament prophets are simply gadflies laying guilt trips on the people and the leaders, and generally pronouncing a foreboding future of destruction and ruin. In fact, the prophets often find themselves in roles something like that.

But the real function of the prophet is to hear and then speak the word of God. The king rules, the priest fulfills the temple liturgy, but the prophet has the

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special role to provide both the priest and the king, as well as the people, the true word of God by which they should govern their lives, their nations and the temple.

Here in Deuteronomy God indicates that he will raise up other prophets after Moses is gone. The people may not have always responded well to Moses, but they know how much they need him. So this promise is as important to them as any contained in the Bible. The people are assured that they won't be left without the active word of God to guide their living. God will raise up other prophets, like Moses, who will bring the people God's word.

But the people ask a good question. They say, "How are we to recognize who is truly speaking the word of God and who is just claiming to?"

What a good question that is! And it's a question as vexing today as it was in the ancient wilderness. Probably most of us tend to take it for granted that the wilderness is that time the Israelites spent in the desert. We think that that time is over, that the Israelites entered the promised land, that they finally arrived. And by extension, we don't tend to think of ourselves in the wilderness. I know that's what I assume most of the time. Until I stop and think about it. And then I realize that we are wandering in the wilderness. Or maybe it's that the journey in the wilderness is never over. Even after the Israelites crossed the Jordan, they remained a confused, contentious and disoriented for all the centuries of their existence. It is, it seems, a part of the human condition. We wander in the wilderness. We are confused. We come to church on Sunday mornings for a lot of reasons, but high among them I imagine, we come to seek guidance in our confusion.

And for us and the ancient Israelites it is good news, good news indeed that God will raise up prophets, that God will speak the truth through these prophets, that God's word and help will be with us.

It is good news, but the quick of mind are quick to put a 'but' into the conversation. "It's very good news that God's word continues to be spoken, but how am I to know who is speaking the true word of God and who is not. There are so many who say they are. There is a clamor of voices. And they say different and in many cases contradictory and opposite things.

From those claiming to speak the word of God you can hear that homosexuality is an abomination, and that those caught in its web are doomed for hell. You can hear from others, who also say they are speaking the word of God, that same sex relationships are as sacred and accepted by God as any and that the church should sanction their unions just as it marries husbands and wives. There are those who claim to speak the word of God who say that abortion is a sin beyond the pale, and those who say that those who believe that are simply using the word of God to make sure women do not have power over their own bodies, and they wonder how the conversation would go if men instead of women were the ones who

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became pregnant. There are those who say that the death penalty is God's justice, and those that say it is an egregious sin to take human life. Some prophets say that God is in favor of tax cuts and others say God is in favor of programs to help those in need.

Oh yes, we are in the wilderness, wandering in circles, prophets pointing at every compass point saying, "Follow me; I have heard God speak; I know the way."

It is good news that the word of God continues to be spoken, but how are we to know who is actually speaking it?

When Moses poses that question on behalf of the people to God, the answer God returns is as straightforward as anything found in the Bible: "If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken." The prophet who speaks the word of God speaks the truth. You can tell a true prophet by whether what he says turns out to be true or not, whether the things he says will happen actually do.

The record doesn't tell us if the Israelites were satisfied with this answer, but for us, it may seem to leave us little closer to a way to tell the truth of what we are hearing. Hindsight is always twenty-twenty they say, but we have to figure things out in the present. We have to make decisions every day. By the time we can use hindsight, it is too late for us.

But God understood that we have more access to hindsight than we think we do. When we ask the questions of what is true, we can imagine, often with some accuracy how things will look from the future.

Ronald Heifetz in his book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, offers a suggestion to those who lead and must know the truth if they are to lead well. He says that you sometimes have to, at least mentally, leave the dance floor and look at things from the balcony. What he means is that on the dance floor you are in the middle of the swirling motion. You are part of the pandemonium, and it is often very hard to have a sense of what the whole thing looks like. Or if you dance like I do, you have a hard time knowing what you yourself is doing. But if you go to the balcony and look down at the dance floor, the whole thing looks much more coherent that it does at floor level. You can see the patterns of the movement. You can easily see where the dancers are in step and out of step.

There are several ways in which we can get to the balcony and judge what we see and hear. One way is quite simply to imagine how history will look at things, that is to try to imagine how things will look in hindsight. When we ask how will history judge the fact that at the turn of the 21st century there grows a widening gap between the rich and the poor in the richest nation on earth, or when we ask how will history judge that within a minuscule moment in the span of creation the rain forests were denuded in the name of progress, I think most of us have to have

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an uneasy sense that the rationalizations and excuses made for these phenomena will not stand the test of time.

When you consider what is true and what is not, it will always be best to try to differentiate between present convenience and the truth in a broader sense. It is convenient and in my current best interest, one might argue, to make a lot of money and make myself as secure as possible, even it is at the expense of others. But is it really true that that is the best thing to do, or is it but a personal convenience I wish to justify as a broader truth. How does it look from the balcony? How would history judge such a stance? Does that sound like the word of God.

Similar to the consideration of present convenience, and perhaps the most critical area of all for discernment, is differentiating between what we or society already believes and what is the word of God. One of the most dangerous things to which religion falls prey is becoming a mouthpiece for what people want to believe or what people already believe. Remember, the promised prophet is to bring the word of God. Part of the reason that prophets of old seemed gadflies and party spoilers is that they refused to tell people what they wanted to hear. The king's courts were filled with prophets who were paid to say what the king wanted to hear. But the real prophets refused to, and the real prophets were proven right by the standard God set up: what they said would happen did happen. The king's paid prophets were easy to listen to, but listening to them was, in the end, disastrous.

Today our society still has enormous difficulty with homosexuality. While few condone actions such as the murder of Matthew Shepherd, many find homosexuality to be among the greatest immoralities and abominations. And there are many who believe that it is among the things that God finds most heinous. That is, many are convinced that the word of God has spoken about homosexuality and that word is a word of condemnation.

But the question is this: Is this sense that homosexuality is an abomination the word of God, or is it a reflection of today's societal standards? That is, is it the word of God, or is it simply what we want to believe and already do believe?

One place people turn to see is the Bible. But the Bible is almost entirely silent on the issue, and where it seems to consider it at all, the Bible is ambiguous at best. On the other hand Leviticus 11:7 is absolutely clear that you cannot eat pork. And Leviticus 19:27 tells us, unambiguously, "You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard." Very few Christians I know find the violation of these commandments to be defilement or abomination.

Such inconsistency in rating the level of various violations at least raises the question: How much was the word of God searched for the truth and how much was it searched to find what we want it to say?

So, God has promised to keep his word alive, to raise up prophets who would bring it to us. Like the ancient Israelites, we have to be enormously grateful that

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God continues to speak to us. But, like the ancient Israelites, we are left to question what is true, and how do we know? In the end, there may be times when knowing is exceedingly difficult. But more often, it may be easier than we think. If we imagine how a thing will look in hindsight, if we try to get to the balcony and evaluate it away from the rush of the dance floor, if we guard from confusing our personal convenience with God's intent, and most especially, if we are wary of religious perspectives which simply ratify what we already believe and want to hear God say, we will come a long way toward developing a good capacity to tell if a thing is true. We will come a long way toward knowing which prophets speak the word of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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