

THE PROPHET

Deuteronomy 18:15-22

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series B)

January 28, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Old Testament lesson comes from *Deuteronomy*, chapter 18, verses 15 through 22. In this Old Testament lesson, the prophet Moses speaks of an even greater Prophet to come. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Deuteronomy 18, beginning at verse 15, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁵“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—¹⁶just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’¹⁷ And the LORD said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken.¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.¹⁹ And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.²⁰ But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’²¹ And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?’—²²when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today we're going to take a walk back in the Old Testament. We go back to the time of Moses in the Exodus. Deuteronomy was probably written around 1407 BC. The entire book is a sermon or maybe a series of three sermons that Moses delivered to the people of Israel near the end of their forty years in the wilderness.

The forty years started in the book of Exodus, when Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. That's when God parted the Red Sea and the people walked through on dry ground. Then, because of their disobedience and unfaithfulness to the LORD, he kept them in the wilderness for forty years. He provided for all their physical needs while they waited, so he was gracious and protective, but he also disciplined them. He kept them there to teach them to trust in him.

Then, after forty years, the LORD brought the people into the land he had promised to give to them. That's where Deuteronomy fits in. It's right at the end of the forty years in the wilderness. But Moses did not go into the land. He died shortly before they went in, so Deuteronomy is kind of his farewell address to the nation. He reminds them what the LORD had brought them through. He restates the commandments God had given to them. That's what the name of the book means. “Deuteronomy” means “second law.” And Moses lays out the covenant before them. It was an earthly and political covenant. Basically, if the people of Israel would keep the commandments

THE PROPHET (Deuteronomy 18:15-22)

of the LORD, then he would bless them in the land and give them peace from all their enemies around them. But if they disobey the LORD, then he would hand them over to their enemies. And, in the end, that's what happened. So this was a covenant of works, not of grace. And the point of it was not for the people to earn eternal life, but simply to have a decent life here on earth. It was not a covenant of grace, but of works, even though God was certainly gracious to them, and, in many ways, the Old Covenant of works looked forward to the New Covenant of grace.

In this part of Deuteronomy, Moses speaks of prophets who will come after him. And he especially speaks of one particular Prophet whom the LORD will raise up. The main focus of the text is that one special Prophet, but we'll start with the other prophets first, so that we can end with the big one.

Moses speaks of other prophets. These are prophets with a lower case "p." The work of a prophet is to speak the Word of God. And we see in the Old Testament that, most of the time, this did not mean making predictions about the future. Some of the prophets did that some of the time, but, most of the time, they were calling the people of Israel to repentance. And if they made a prediction about the future, it was usually a warning about what would happen if the people did not repent or a promise about the Messiah, who would come to restore them. These prophets would be people like Elijah, Elisha, all those guys who have books named for them in the second half of the Old Testament, and John the Baptizer. But Moses doesn't say much, or anything, about these good prophets.

He speaks of the false prophets. He says, "The prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die" (18:20). Notice this: God prescribed the death penalty for false doctrine. That's a pretty big deal. Teaching a word that God has not spoken is very serious. There's nothing worse you can do than lead other people away from a true faith in the one true God. That has eternal ramifications. So God is very serious about this. Now, I'm not suggesting we should bring back the death penalty for false doctrine. That was for a specific time and place. Although, it might make me more careful about my work. But I simply want you to notice how serious this is. And even though we don't have the death penalty for false doctrine today, God will hold false prophets accountable on the Judgment Day.

So how do we identify a false prophet? It's a lot easier for us today. We have an entire Bible of true words about God, and we have it right at our fingertips. We can, and should, check everything we hear. But in 1407 BC, only part of the Bible had been written. And there were probably only a few scrolls among this great nation. So Moses gave them another test, and it's pretty simple. "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him" (18:22).

Now I don't know if there are still prophets like this, who make predictions today. I'm certainly not going to say that God cannot send us a prophet like the true prophets of old. But I will say that everyone I've observed today, who claims to be a prophet, has discredited themselves in some way. They have either contradicted portions of Scripture or made predictions that did not come to pass. Often times, it's both.

But sometimes their hearers give them a second chance. They say, "Yeah, he was wrong about that, but he was right about this other thing." That's not the test. The test for a prophet is one strike and you're out. So here's the thing: if someone claims to be a prophet in the sense that

THE PROPHET (Deuteronomy 18:15-22)

they have a special word from God, we don't really know that until their words come to pass. And then, if their words do not come to pass, we know that they are a false prophet.

And Moses says something interesting about the false prophet: "You need not be afraid of him." Do not fear their predictions. Do not give any heed to their words. The implication, though, is that we should fear God, and we should listen to the words he has already spoken by his true prophets. And "fear" does not necessarily mean "terror." But it means that we believe and obey God's words, we honor and respect him, and we should be terrified of disobeying or disregarding his words. So do not fear the false prophets, but fear the LORD, and fear the Prophet he promised to raise up.

So let's talk about the Prophet with a capital "P." Moses speaks of one special Prophet, and he tells us to listen to him (18:15).

This is a humble thing to do. It's hard to entrust people you care about to someone else. Parents might have a hard time entrusting their kids to a babysitter or a school teacher. As a pastor, it's sometimes hard to tell you to listen to someone else, because I know there are false prophets out there. For most of you, I will probably not be your last pastor. Someone else will come after me. And it's hard for me to say, "Listen to him," because I don't even know who he is. It's tempting for me to say, "Go ahead and get a new pastor, but keep my words above his." That's a bit of pride and a bit of concern for you. But Moses says, regarding this other Prophet, that the people should listen to him. That's a humble thing to say. The source of Moses' humility is faith in the LORD. He trusts that God will send this prophet, and he trusts that God will care for his people.

So who is the Prophet? And how is he like Moses?

Moses was different than the other prophets. The last chapter of Deuteronomy talks about this. This is chapter 34. It records Moses' death, so we figure someone else, maybe Joshua, probably wrote the last chapter. And the very last verses of the book talk about how "there [had] not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses" (34:10). So, at whatever time the last chapter of Deuteronomy was written, this special Prophet had not yet come. And then it describes what was unique about Moses. There were two basic things.

First, the LORD knew Moses face to face (34:10). Other prophets heard the voice of the LORD in an audible way, like what we read about Samuel a few weeks ago (1 Sam. 3). But Moses had an even more direct relationship with the LORD. During the Exodus, Moses would go to the tent of meeting, and whenever Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud, which concealed the presence of God, would settle on the tent, and "the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33:11).

The other unique thing about Moses was "all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt, ... and for all the mighty power and the great deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of all Israel (Deut. 34:11-12). Moses was more than just a speaking prophet. There were a few prophets, like Elijah and Elisha, who did a few signs and wonders. But most of the prophets were all talk, which was not bad, of course, because God called them to speak. But Moses was a prophet of action. He spoke and he performed signs and wonders. While in Egypt, there were the ten plagues, which provided a cover for Israel to escape from Egypt (Ex. 7-12). There was the parting of the Red Sea, when Moses lifted his staff, and sea was parted for the people of Israel to walk through (Ex. 14). Moses struck a rock with his staff and water came out (Ex. 17). Then he did it again on another occasion (Num. 20). Those are just some of the highlights. The point of all the signs and wonders was not just for show, but the LORD used these

THE PROPHET (Deuteronomy 18:15-22)

mighty works to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt and to save them from death. So Moses was a miraculous deliverer.

So these are the two things that were unique about Moses: he spoke with God face to face, and he was a miraculous deliverer. So the Prophet to come, who is “like Moses,” will also do these things.

The people of Israel were looking for this Prophet. We see an example of this when the Pharisees sent messengers to investigate John the Baptizer. They asked him a series of questions about who he was. Among them, they asked straight up, “Are you the Prophet?” (John 1:21). So we see that they remembered this prophecy of Moses. They knew that a Prophet was coming, unlike any Israel had seen since the time of Moses.

So who is this Prophet? Who speaks with God face to face? And who does signs and wonders to deliver God’s people from death? Have you figured it out yet? It wasn’t John the Baptizer, he denied being the Prophet. But he also spoke of someone greater than himself that was coming.

The Prophet is Jesus. Jesus is more than just a prophet. Moses was also more than a prophet. But Jesus is even more than a prophet. And so we see that when Moses speaks of a Prophet like himself, he does not mean someone who is like him, but not quite as great. It’s the other way around. Moses is the lesser; Jesus is the greater.

As the Son of God, he speaks with the Father face to face. This is greater than Moses, because, with Moses, God’s presence was still veiled by a cloud, and God did not allow Moses to see his glory (Ex. 33:18-23).

And Moses did not do signs and wonders by his own will. He did what the LORD commanded him to do. And the one time he presumed to do it his own way, which was the second time he brought water out of a rock, the LORD forbade him from entering into the Promised Land (Num. 20:12). But we don’t see that with Jesus. He does signs and wonders by his own will. It is not contrary to the Father’s will, because they are of one will. So Jesus is always doing the will of his Father, but he doesn’t have to ask the Father what that will is, and he doesn’t have to wait for the Father to tell him. They are of one will, so when occasions arise for Jesus to do signs and wonders, he just does them. And they are greater than Moses’ works. Jesus healed the sick. He cast out demons. He multiplied food. He raised the dead. He even raised himself from the dead.

And, of course, as a prophet, what he said came to pass. This is how we know that he is the Prophet and he is the Son of God. He made prophecies about his disciples, which came to pass. He made prophecies about Jerusalem and the temple, which came to pass. Greatest of all, he made prophecies about his own death and resurrection, and they came to pass. So we know that Jesus is established as a prophet, and not just a prophet, but *the* Prophet. We should fear him.

We even see immediate fulfillment of his prophecies. Normal prophets predict what will happen, and then it does. It’s just foresight. But Jesus’ words carry a greater authority. He speaks, and it makes things happen. In the Gospel lesson we read today, Jesus cast out a demon by saying, “**Be silent, and come out of him**” (Mark 1:25). He raised Lazarus by saying, “**Lazarus, come out**” (John 11:43). He calmed a storm by saying, “**Peace! Be still**” (Mark 4:39). Lesser prophets, predicted what would happen. But when Jesus speaks, his words make things happen. He far exceeds Moses and all the other prophets. He is *the* Prophet.

THE PROPHET (Deuteronomy 18:15-22)

So Jesus is like Moses, but he far exceeds him in these two ways: he has a face-to-face relationship with the Father, and he miraculously delivers us from slavery and death.

Through Moses, God delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. He spared them from death as they journeyed through the wilderness. And he eventually brought them into the Promised Land. This is but a shadow of the greater deliverance in Jesus Christ. Through Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection, God delivers you from slavery to sin and death. As we journey through this wilderness of life, and it is a treacherous wilderness, our Good Shepherd protects us from evil and feeds us with his prophetic Word, for we do "not live by bread alone, but ... by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4; Luke 4:4). And he leads us into the new creation, which the land of Israel was just a shadow of.

And as Jesus far exceeds Moses, and as his deliverance far exceeds the deliverance God worked through Moses, so this New Covenant also far exceeds the Old Covenant. That covenant, which God made through Moses, was a covenant of works. It depended on the people's obedience to it. But Jesus, as the greater Moses and the greater Prophet, fulfilled that covenant in order to establish a New Covenant. So this is a covenant of grace. We might say it still depends on works, but not our works. It depends on the works of Jesus Christ, and that is why it is grace to us. "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

So Jesus is *the* Prophet. He is your Prophet. He speaks forgiveness and life to you, and it comes to pass, because he has delivered you from slavery to sin and death through his own crucifixion and resurrection. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.