

Introduction

In Deuteronomy God promises to raise up a prophet like Moses, who will speak for God; in Psalm 111 God shows the people the power of God's works. For the church these are ways of pointing to the unique authority people sensed in Jesus' actions and words. We encounter that authority in God's word, around which we gather, the word that prevails over any lesser spirit that would claim power over us, freeing us to follow Jesus.

Prayer of the Day

Compassionate God, you gather the whole universe into your radiant presence and continually reveal your Son as our Saviour. Bring wholeness to all that is broken and speak truth to us in our confusion, that all creation will see and know your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. **Amen.**

First Reading: Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Today's reading is part of a longer discourse in Deuteronomy, an updating of the law for the Israelite community as the people wait to enter the promised land. Here Moses assures the people that God will continue to guide them through prophets who will proclaim the divine word.

[Moses said:] ¹⁵The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶This 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." ¹⁷Then the LORD replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸I 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. ¹⁹Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰But 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."

Psalm 111

- ¹Hallelujah! I will give thanks to the LORD with | my whole heart,
in the assembly of the upright, in the | congregation.
- ²Great are your | works, O LORD,
pondered by all who de- | light in them.
- ³Majesty and splendor | mark your deeds,
and your righteousness en- | dures forever.
- ⁴You cause your wonders to | be remembered;
you are gracious and full | of compassion.
- ⁵You give food to | those who fear you,
remembering forev- | er your covenant.
- ⁶You have shown your people the power | of your works
in giving them the lands | of the nations.
- ⁷The works of your hands are faithful- | ness and justice;
all of your pre- | cepts are sure.
- ⁸They stand fast forev- | er and ever,
because they are done in | truth and equity.
- ⁹You sent redemption to your people and commanded your cove- | nant forever;
holy and awesome | is your name.
- ¹⁰The fear of the LORD is the begin- | ning of wisdom;
all who practice this have a good understanding. God's praise en- | dures forever.

Gospel Reading: Mark 1:21-28

Forces that would bring death and disease have taken hold of a man, yet they recognize Jesus and know what his power means for them. Jesus commands these forces to leave and people are amazed at his authority.

²¹[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and 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." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They 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." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Prayers of Intercession

Guided by Christ made known to the nations, let us offer our prayers for the church, the world, and all people in need, saying “let us pray,” and responding, “Have mercy, O God.”

A brief silence.

For all who share the gospel and proclaim freedom in Christ throughout the world: prophets, teachers, pastors, deacons, and lay leaders; for the church and its ministries, let us pray. Have mercy, O God.

For all God’s works in creation: plants and animals, water and soil, forests and farms; and for those tasked with protecting our natural resources and all that exists, let us pray. Have mercy, O God.

For government and leaders: cities and nations, rescue professionals and legal aid attorneys, elected officials and grassroots organizers; for all responsible for the well-being of civil society, let us pray. Have mercy, O God.

For those who suffer in mind, body, or spirit: those who are sick and hospitalized, those living with HIV/AIDS, those struggling with mental illness, those who are hungry or homeless, and all in any need (*especially*); for caregivers, hospice workers, and home health aides, let us pray. Have mercy, O God.

For the concerns of this congregation: those who travel, those absent from worship, those celebrating birthdays or anniversaries; for the people of God in this place and for other needs in our community (*especially those who we name now aloud, or silently on our hearts...* [pause]), let us pray. Have mercy, O God.

For the covenant God made with us in the waters of baptism, in thanksgiving for the baptized who have died in the Lord, let us pray. Have mercy, O God.

Merciful God, hear the prayers of your people, spoken or silent, for the sake of the one who dwells among us, your Son, Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Amen.

A reflection for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany...

Rules or Relationship?

Do you want to be right, or do you want to have a relationship? When a teenager spends \$200 on the world's coolest sunglasses is it the time to comment on the foolishness of the purchase or to simply smile and nod? May the people of Corinth eat meat sacrificed to idols? Paul seems to suggest (1 Cor 8:1-13) that it does not really matter where the meat comes from. What matters is how the people you care about feel about that meat. Will it challenge their faith? Will it become a stumbling block to the weak? Do you want to be right, or do you want to have a relationship?

This theme continues in the gospel. The laws prohibiting work on the sabbath carry deep meaning for many people of faith, and yet on this sabbath Jesus rebukes an unclean spirit and frees a man. Jesus chooses to care for the man and to free him, rather than worry over the details of the law. In this instance Jesus is not condemned for his choice, as he will be later. But his fame begins to spread throughout the region. That too will later prove dangerous, yet it is also a sign of the evangelical nature of the faith. This is not a private faith, held closely and kept hidden. Rather it is an outgoing faith spread from person to person throughout the world.

To this day people continue to place barriers and restrictions on the faith. Congregations do this in intentional ways, for example, by setting a minimum age for receiving holy communion. The benefits of these restrictions can be debated, but at least they are chosen intentionally. Churches also create unintentional barriers. Consider the clothes people wear to church each Sunday. Are many people wearing suits and ties? Do you see blue jeans? Do people wear shorts in the summer? What are some of the ways people might be kept from a relationship with Jesus by the barriers we create?

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