

Year B, January 28, 2018
4 Epiphany
Christ Church, Mexia

In the 1999 movie entitled *Dogma*, which as bishop, I cannot recommend because of its vulgarity and earthiness. I have watched it several times so you wouldn't have to. Two fallen angels ejected from paradise find themselves banned in Wisconsin. They are now headed for New Jersey where they find a loophole that can get them back into heaven. The only catch is that it will destroy humanity. A group bands together to stop them.

God's messenger Metatron invites a young woman – Bethany to stop the end of the world. He appears to her and says:

Human beings have neither the aural nor the psychological capacity to withstand the awesome power of God's true voice. Were you to hear it, your mind would cave in and your heart would explode within your chest. We went through five Adams before we figured that one out.

[I act] as the voice of God, He says, and any documented occasion when some yahoo claims God has spoken to them, they're speaking to me. Or, they're talking to themselves.

Today's scripture from Deuteronomy reminds us that the work of the prophet and the work of the people is particular. It is incumbent upon the prophet to speak the truth.

And for the people to listen

The scripture is a very radical document in the face of both the ancient and contemporary world. It offers a picture of the human place in the midst of creation and the cosmos as intentional.

All of that which surrounds us is in the words of Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "neither hostile nor indifferent." We are here because God intends us to be, we are cared for, and God seeks our wellbeing.

To this we are to respond chiefly by loving God - and giving thanks. To be grateful for what is given in the cosmic relationship. Secondly, we are to love others. Everything in the scripture points to the invitation to love God and love others.

In the words of my friend and poet Malcolm Guite, the whole of scripture draws us towards those goals - and if it doesn't, we are not reading it

correctly. Our place in creation and our call to be a place of orientation within the wider creation and cultures that surround us is unique.

This God is, while greater than that which no greater can be thought, stands outside our comprehension while, at the same time, continuously inviting worship through the service of the other. How God treats us is the way we are to treat others.

We are, Sacks says,

bidden to love the neighbour and the stranger, to engage in acts of kindness and compassion, and to build a society based on love... God created the world in love and forgiveness and asks us to love and forgive others... I believe that to be the most profound moral idea in human history. ([Rabbi Sacks, "The Morality of Love."](#))

Our passage today captures this clearly in the discussion about prophecy and, reminds us that any prophet that tells you anything different than these basic truths is no prophet of God.

This passage you see is in direct relationship with the rest of Deuteronomy; and, especially its core – Chapter 10 vs. 17-19:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

The scripture is God's word on this work. The prophets amplify this word and our work. The mission to be a particular kind of community is not new, not given by Jesus, but instead highlighted by Jesus in and through His teaching.

For the Christian, we see Jesus as the manifestation of this God who loves without partiality and bribes. God's love as exemplified in the unique person of Jesus is not able to be purchased. Moreover, it is meant for the least and lost. It is a love that comes to the side of the fatherless and the widow. It is made real as it stands in solidarity with the stranger. Jesus offers us an image of God's love for those who are loveless and unlovable. God's grace is free and unbounded by the conventions of powers and philosophies, social norms and politics. And, the God who called the pilgrims at Moses' side

invites us in the words and practices of Jesus to create a similar kind of peaceful loving community.

The community of God is to be a blessing to the world and by this blessing the world itself will be judged. Those who are prophets and listeners to the word of God look around and see clearly. This is a foreign land. We inhabit a foreign land that does not much resemble the kingdom of God. A foreign land at war with others. At war with itself. At war with the least and the lost and the weary. A foreign land where many are prisoners to the powers and principalities that rule. Those who live differently, choose to live in the world of judgment, isolation, and greed, are judged by their own actions and words.

Our passage today reminds us there are many other prophets attempting to get your attention, presuming to speak in God's name. But really only doing the work of the powers and principalities of this world. They and their words and their efforts will have a limited life span. Believing that these things, the people, the politics, the powers, the wealth of this world, will save you is just one fool listening to another.

The prophet of yesterday and the prophet of today are prophets of a particular kind of kingdom. There are many kingdoms and many powers and principalities who also have their prophets. The prophetic voice of the reign of God is one that reminds us who our God is and what we are made so to do.

The Gospel of Luke clearly places the New Testament story within the communal trajectory of the Old Testament captured in this lesson from Deuteronomy. Luke sees the *ecclesia* (the band of Jesus followers, their life together, and mission) as a part of the arc of God's blessed community of Shalom. The prophets pointed in the past to the future community which follows Christ - in as much as that community resembles the community imagined in Deuteronomy.

It is to be a community of prophecy. Prophecy that is lived out and prophesy that is spoken. Prophecy oriented around the divine, loving creator and prophesy that gets its hands dirty serving the people of God.

The Rt. Rev. John Hines, Bishop of Texas and our Presiding Bishop, leaning on this notion, preached,

[T]he Body of Christ must be prepared to offer itself up for the sake of the healing and the solidarity of the whole human family, whatever its religious or racial identities.

Especially must the Body of Christ risk its own life in bearing and sharing the burdens of those who are being exploited, humiliated, and disinherited!

The world is to be, IS turned upside down by the *ecclesia* – by the followers of Jesus. (And, I would add: if this is not at least half of the consequence of the church's existence then we are probably not doing something quite right.) The people who present themselves as Godly and righteous will only be accounted as such in as much as they mimic the God who hears the cries of the prisoner, the slave, the orphan, the widow, the poor man crying at the gate.

God...

God's scripture...

God's prophets are clear that the work of empire and power in that such principalities offer a claim that an economic exchange of difference and bribes will bring peace and prosperity - this is a lie. Just as the *Pax Romana* was no peace at all but a violent oppressive power. Power is exchanged for its promises of individual allegiance. "In God we trust" is a radical statement. But when the god we are speaking about is synonymous to the power of a state or nation, we are dealing with something quite different than the God of Deuteronomy and the Gospels.

Luke's message, which is the same as on that day recorded in Deuteronomy, a radical message of grace and mercy for the least, the lost, the sinful and sin sick soul. The community that proclaims that it is God's, is a community that feeds, houses, and heals the poor, widow, and orphan. A nation that forgets this whether it is Israel (as in Deuteronomy) or the United States is no nation under God.

In the movie *Dogma*, Metatron says, "Tell a person that you're the Metatron (the voice or messenger of God) and they stare at you blankly. Mention something out of a Charlton Heston movie and suddenly everybody is a theology scholar."

We suffer, bound in this foreign land, because what we have come to believe is more informed by movies about God and false prophets who serve the powers and principalities and tell us what to think...

God is clear - let the people hear.

To be chosen by God to be a particular kind of people, unified in a particular kind of community, meant for a particular purpose is a complicated gift indeed. One of difference. One of sacrifice

It is a responsibility not simply to worship a god of our own making but to worship a God who expects that the first neighbors on our mind will be the lowliest ones in our community and country.

We are to be the prophets and people in this foreign land in which the people of God find themselves.

The widow
The orphan
The hungry and sick

Long to hear the true prophet's voice and receive the labors of those who heed God's voice