

Fourth Sunday of Epiphany
Deuteronomy 18:15-19
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Judeans, Samaritans, Galileans, Jews, half-Jews, and foreign converts alike; all were awaiting the Prophet, long ago foretold by Moses. Moses said, “The Lord, your God, will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your brothers.”¹ At the time of Jesus’ life on earth, many Jews believed that this predicted Prophet would be the Messiah who would restore the nation of Israel. Contrary to what is commonly thought, many expectant Jews were looking for more than political restoration. The expectation was that this restoration brought on by the Messiah would include a spiritual renewal. We read in Ezekiel that God would gather Israel from the nations, restoring them to their land, and He would “give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them.”² With great anticipation then, Israel awaited the appointed time of the Messiah, and given their situation, one could understand why. They were waiting for the Prophet who, like Moses before, would overthrow the tyrant, lead them out of slavery, teach Torah, provide bread from heaven,³ and restore them, unified once again in the land of Israel. In other words, one thing was for sure, the Messianic Prophet would be like the earlier prophet, only better.

We all know the story of Israel in Egypt, how God sent Charlton Heston to confront Pharaoh. Israel had lived under slavery, under cruel taskmasters, under rod and lash, and under arbitrary penalty. They cried out to God for justice and redemption. God did liberate His people, leaving behind a mockery of the false gods of the Egyptians, a horrific scene of weeping over the deaths of the firstborn, and with the people of Egypt showering possessions on the Israelites as they were leaving. This was a form of just repayment for the years of captivity and absence of compensation. We know about the crossing of the Red Sea, the drowning of Pharaoh’s hosts, and the songs of praise written after God’s victory over the dreaded oppressors. We know about the Ten Commandments, the worship of the golden calf, the rebellion of the people, and their time in the wilderness. Throughout it all, Moses was the prophet, leading the people at the direction of God.

In Deuteronomy, Moses recalls that the people requested not to be spoken to directly by God, lest they die. This event takes place at Sinai when the Ten Commandments were given. The manifestation of God’s presence to ancient Israel was so terrifying that they were afraid for their lives. Given what they had just witnessed in Egypt at the Passover, there was little question as to why they would fear such a display of power. If God could kill each and every firstborn son of the Egyptians, man and animal alike, then He could do the same to Israel. In Exodus, where these events are first recorded, God tells the people of Israel, “you have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven.”⁴ One would expect this to say that the people heard for themselves, not saw for themselves. God’s Word was a visible Word, and that same Word was made visible in the unassuming form of the Word made flesh.

¹ Deuteronomy 18:15

² Ezekiel 11:17-19

³ *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 1:9, as quoted in *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*, Brant Pitre, p. 90.

⁴ Exodus 20:22

Much of the Gospels can be read through the lens of seeing Jesus as a new Moses. Historically, in an effort to keep law and gospel distinct, some Lutherans have shied away from this because they didn't want to make Jesus a new Lawgiver. But if we think about Torah, not as Law, as it has come to be translated, but simply as "teaching", which is a more literal translation at any rate, then there is no conflict with seeing Jesus as the new, greater Moses. Today's brief lesson is no exception. Jesus goes to a synagogue and teaches in such a way that the people were amazed. They were amazed, not just at the content of His teaching, which was very much in keeping with Hillel Judaism⁵, but at the way that He taught. This was because Jesus taught as one who taught like Moses. Other teachers of the Torah would always refer to one of the great teachers of tradition, often Hillel and Shammai were cited as authorities. Moses had no need to cite a source for the laws and the teaching he derived and passed on from them. God was the source. When Jesus teaches on His own authority, He is claiming a higher authority than Moses. This was a bold thing for a first century Jew to do in a synagogue. Of course, He is that Word that predates the teaching of Moses, and His authority is authentic, derived from the Father, and requiring no previous teacher to legitimate it.

One important aspect of Moses' teaching was that it established a separation of the realms. Life and death were two distinct realms which were not to be intermingled. When we come across the term "unclean" in the Bible, the implication is nearly always that something associated with death has come into inappropriate contact with something life oriented. In fact, most of the time, unclean conditions had nothing to do with sin or evil but were associated somehow with death. An unclean spirit then, has no business dwelling with the living, let alone possessing a living human. For Jesus, driving out demons was not just a matter of doing something nice for someone in distress. To be sure, exorcising unclean spirits was a loving gesture, but it revealed much more than a kind, wonder-working Messiah. The real epiphany was that the Messiah was restoring creation by banishing the unclean spirit from the realm of the living, and sending it back to the realm of death where it belonged. This was something Moses is not recorded as doing. What Moses set aright on paper Jesus sets aright in deed.

It must have been terribly upsetting to live in a world with reckless spirits, transcending realms, wreaking havoc on poor humans. Imagine what it would be like to encounter such a being who had entrenched itself in the body of a person. How helpless would we feel? How desperate for someone that could do something? No wonder that the people reacted to Jesus driving out evil spirits the way they did.

While I suspect it is not common to have confrontations with dark spiritual forces, they do exist. We do ourselves no favors by denying their existence. What was Screwtape's advice to Wormwood? Convince the patient that demons don't exist. So, we should be aware that we do not struggle only against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil.⁶ We also struggle against the desires of the flesh, our own flesh, which we must bring under the control of our minds taken captive by Christ. That is the only way to overcome temptation. But another part of us wages war against what is good and just and beautiful. It seeks to corrupt, exploit, and defile. We misuse good medicines, good foods, good drinks, and good people. Rather than taking upon our lips the

⁵ Hillel Judaism is a reference to the School of Hillel, a prominent school of rabbinic Judaism before the time of Christ, but was taken into the Essene community at the time of Jesus. The dominant rabbinical school at the time before the destruction of the Temple was the more literalist, legalist, and exclusionist School of Shammai.

⁶ Ephesians 6:12

words of Moses, “Follow justice and justice alone”⁷, we echo the refrains of perversions of justice. Like Shylock, we insist on getting our pound of flesh from those who have done us wrong, allowing scorn over wounded pride to overcome more temperate responses. We want others to pay in the extreme for wrongs done against us. We corrupt what is beautiful, turning our natural desire to cooperate with God in procreation into a low objectification of others, treating them as nothing more than means to our own gratification. We don’t need to be harassed by forces outside of ourselves to do evil; we have plenty of dark desires in ourselves.

How helpless do we feel at times? How like the Children of Israel do we feel at times? How quickly does our desperation overtake our hope? What has become of our expectations of the life of faith?

Thanks be to God, for He hears the cries of His people. The very source of goodness came into our vice-laden world, and He made it good again. The very source of justice came into perfect injustice, so that He could offer true justice which is always tempered with a “mercy that is not strained, but droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath.”⁸ The very source of beauty came into the ugliness of the world, becoming the object of scorn so that we could be the object of His affection. In doing so, He has made us His end, His telos, His purpose. He was the rejected One, but He is beautiful in our eyes.

What the people of Israel experienced in their exodus from Egypt was a new life. A life of freedom after centuries of expectation. What the people around Jesus experienced was very similar. The tyrants of sin, death, and the devil were put to flight in His redemptive work. Sins were forgiven, life was restored, infirmities were healed. This is what it looks like in the Messianic age; this is what it looks like when God is in charge. In Christ, our hope in His Word is steadfast, and our faith perseveres to the end, even as He continues to work among us.

After defeating sin, death, and the devil, Jesus leads His people through the exodus of Holy Baptism. In that comforting flood of sacred water, what was unclean was exorcised, and now, only His life remains. We are no longer slaves to sin. As Moses once taught Israel, Jesus continues to teach us Torah on His own absolute authority. He provides us bread from heaven for our journey through the wilderness, as the One who was the source of the mana becomes the new daily bread for us in the Eucharist. And in Christ, humanity is restored. The hope that existed among divergent peoples at the time of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection has been made the one hope, the one faith, and the one birth of new life for all people. We have received an undivided heart, and His Spirit breathes new life into us each day. And finally, Christ is leading us through this wilderness to the promised land, the life of the world to come. Many saints have traversed this road before us. Until this week, Bill Umland walked this road with us, but now, his Messianic hopes are fulfilled.

Consider how all that is good, just, and beautiful, fills the eyes of the saints, including Barbara, Ben, Bill, Marianne, Ruth, Sharon, and Sue. Blessed are they who have gone in the name of the Lord, for Christ was the blessed One who came as Lord. May we follow in the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

⁷ Deuteronomy 16:20

⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Act 4, Scene 1).