

January 28, 2024B

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany



“What is a prophet?”

St. John United Church of Christ

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Prayers and Liturgy by

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CALL TO WORSHIP: Based on Psalm 111

Great are the works of God, and greatly to be praised.
God’s righteousness endures forever.

We come together as a congregation of believers.

We give thanks to God with whole hearts.

God is gracious and merciful and trustworthy.

At all times, God is mindful of the covenant.

The works of God’s hands are established among us.

**We can count on God’s righteousness and
faithfulness.**

Awe before God is the beginning of wisdom.

All who approach God in fear have good
understanding.

Holy and awesome is God’s name.

We call on God to empower our worship.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: God of the prophets, help us to recognize your voice among the competing claims of our day. Raise up in our midst authentic witnesses to your truth. Be present with us now to guide our prayers and praise. Let us not presume to know your message without careful listening or to speak your word without discerning the Spirit. Light your fires within us so we may heed your summons and give our best in your service. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 18:15-20 Common English Bible

¹⁵The LORD your God will raise up a prophet like me from your community, from your fellow Israelites.

He’s the one you must listen to. ¹⁶That’s exactly what

to the Lord my God's voice any longer. I don't want to die!"

¹⁷ The LORD said to me: What they've said is right. ¹⁸ I'll raise up a prophet for them from among their fellow Israelites—one just like you. I'll put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. ¹⁹ I myself will hold accountable anyone who doesn't listen to my words, which that prophet will speak in my name. ²⁰ However, any prophet who arrogantly speaks a word in my name that I haven't commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods—that prophet must die."

MESSAGE: "What is a prophet?"

Since Advent we have been reading words from different prophets found in the First (Old) Testament: Isaiah, Samuel, Jonah, etc. Today we read some words from the prophet that the Jews, even today, consider THE PROPHET, Moses. Moses is giving instructions to the people he guided out of Egypt. He is preparing them for the time after his death. (He dies in Chapter 34.) Moses wants to tell them that they will not be alone and this new prophet will come from one of their own people.

In verse 17 the text continues to describe the characteristics of a prophet, according to the Lord. To further describe what a prophet is and is not, I consulted the footnotes in the "New Interpreter's Study Bible."

The foremost qualification for a prophet was that he, or she, should be "*like me*", that is, like Moses.

(verse 15). This qualification is not further elaborated, but it clearly meant that such a person stood within the tradition of Moses and did not presume to offer any teaching that strayed from the central truths that Moses had laid down. (Verse 16) Since God did not address every individual directly, it had always been essential that specially qualified persons should mediate between people and God, as Moses had done. Such a prophet was to have received the call of God. Only then could the prophet presume to address the people in God's name.

True prophecy was an invaluable gift from God, but it inevitably raised the problem that some persons could presume to speak as prophets who were not authorized to do so. Speaking as a prophet in the name of some other god was a self-evident mark of presumption and falsity.

A far more serious problem was posed by those who professed to speak in the name of the Lord God, but who were merely presenting their own words. Verse 22.

In 2009 I had the great opportunity to attend a workshop/retreat at Dubois that was led by my friend, Father Roger Karban, a Bible Scholar. He talked about the "rules" for distinguishing a true prophet from a false prophet. This is what his research discovered.

1. A prophet is the conscious of the people. He tells us the consequences of our present actions. Or another way of understanding this is that the prophet is a person in our community who gives us the future implications of our

present actions. (Prophets do not predict the future in the Hebrew scriptures.) The biblical way of finding out God's will is to look for the prophets among us.

2. A real prophet can never profit from his prophecy. You can't make a living from it.
3. A true prophet suffers for being a prophet. If you follow a real prophet you also will have to suffer in some way.
4. Real prophets always take you back to where faith started or to the beginning. Christian prophets always go back to what Jesus did or said.
5. A real prophet causes confusion. Things will have to change.
6. Forget the other rules. In your heart you know who is a true prophet but because of rule #3, you don't want to admit it.

Moses wanted to be sure the Hebrew people would find a prophet to guide them. What about us today? Can you think or find any prophets among us? What do you think? Amen.

THANK YOU FOR SHARING: Your church is surviving because of your generosity. Please continue your support.

DEDICATION: By giving away some of the wealth we cherish so much, we keep ourselves focused on who you are, gracious God, and on what you expect of us.

As the body of Christ, we seek to be a healing force in our world. May the offerings we present be used in ways that encourage healthful behaviors among us in the church, within our community, and as far as our influence can reach. Receive us and our gifts, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

COMISSION AND BLESSING:

Go out to witness to the good news you have heard. God is even now raising up prophets among us.

We thank God for this time of being together.

We are grateful for freedom to worship and grow.

God is establishing truth among us, inviting us to learn. Dare to question and explore, as disciples of Jesus.

We praise God for insight and guidance we have received. We delight in ways we are able to help others.

God will supply us with words for our witness. We will be led to offer others appropriate help.

All honor and majesty and glory be to God!

May we never stop praising God with our lives!

Amen.