

Epiphany 4/B

TITLE: *The Heartfelt Truth*

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Cor 8:1b-13; Mark 1:21-28

31 January 2021



Over the past few years, the words “disinformation” and “misinformation” have entered into our conversations, news stories, and political analysis more than I can ever remember. And I still don’t really know what the term “alternative facts” means. And people on all sides of any issue have claimed to be the sole possessors and lone purveyors of the truth. All of this confusion has left most of us questioning and searching for just that - the truth.

Where does truth come from? Where does truth reside? Who possesses it? How can I know the truth? And how can I find it amidst all the attractive and appealing, yet possibly false and misleading messages hurled at me and swirling about me?

In our lessons this morning, we find our 21st century, real-life questions being posed and addressed by other people of faith, our spiritual ancestors, so many centuries ago.

Moses is traditionally acknowledged to be the first prophet among the Hebrew people. He was the first recognized spokesperson for God, the earliest mediator between God and God’s chosen people. So, Moses was respected as a figure of authority, revered as a man of great truth – not his own, but God’s truth. Toward the end of his life, having led the people out of their Egyptian captivity and through their forty years of desert wandering, the people grew worried: Who would lead them when Moses was no longer with them? To whom should they look for guidance? Who would inform and interpret the will of God for them? Who could they trust? Who should they trust?

In our first lesson this morning, God acknowledges the people’s concerns and, speaking to Moses, promises: *“I will raise up for them a prophet like you among*

their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.”

“I will raise up for them a prophet ...” and *“I will put my words in the prophet’s mouth ...”* From this divine promise, recorded in one of the earliest books of the Jewish scriptures, springs the phenomenon of biblical prophecy.

What can we say about a prophet? What do we know about these people chosen to fill the honored role first given to Moses? First of all, what they are NOT: Prophets are not unique to Judaism. In fact, prophecy is, in varying forms and to various degrees, found in all religions. And despite the modern-day, popular view, prophets are not primarily concerned with predicting the future. That job is left to soothsayers, diviners, witches, and fortune-tellers, all of whom are repeatedly condemned throughout scripture and not recognized as legitimate vehicles for determining the divine will of God.

The prophet, in both the literal meaning of the word and in the biblical understanding of the role, is “one who speaks for another.” A prophet’s job is primarily that of an interpreter. An interpreter translates the message of one party so that a second party can understand. The message is not the interpreter’s, but that of another; the interpreter is merely the communicator, the mediator between the two parties. An important role! A very important role! But one which must be kept in perspective! For if the interpreter chooses to alter, or amend, or in any way change the original message to conform to what he feels needs to be said, then the interpreter has assumed power beyond their role and the original message is violated. Just as the message is not that of the interpreter, the prophet’s message is not their own; nor is their power or authority their own, for that also comes from a source outside themselves.

Since the time of Moses, people of faith have recognized and honored the valued role of the prophet as the mediator of the mind of God, the interpreter of God’s will within the world, and to the world. But even while recognizing and valuing the role of the prophet, we are confronted with a major problem, a problem which God reminds us of immediately following the promise to Moses: What about the prophets who speak in the name of other gods? What about those posing as interpreters of the Lord, but who are not truly in God’s service, but the service of others, or themselves? How are people of faith to know? Who are we to trust? Among the many messages we receive, which ones are true? Which ones are false?

Some will claim: The true prophet is one who speaks with the authority of God, one who possesses the Spirit of the Lord. True; quite true. But what does the Spirit of God look like, or sound like? What is the litmus test whereby I may test a prophet or the prophet's message and discern its truth or falsity? To say that a true prophet speaks with the Spirit of God is a fact, but it isn't of much practical help in deciding who to believe, who to follow, who to trust.

And unfortunately, we cannot base our decision on our observation of the prophet themselves. After all, if we are trying to discern the truth of the message, our judgments and opinions of the messenger are of little help. Yet, prophets have continually been judged according to the standards of the hearers. Throughout Scripture, prophets are repeatedly discounted and dismissed because of their strange dress or food, unusual behavior or habits. Quite often, if I don't approve of the prophet, I won't approve of the message.

So, I cannot with great accuracy determine exactly who has the Spirit and who doesn't. Neither can I judge the prophecy by the prophet.

Moses' followers and people of faith throughout the centuries, leading down to those of us today, have had to rely on another criterion to discern where to place our trust, who to believe, who to follow. The biblical record and the experience of faithful people through the ages is quite clear: the only real way to know a true prophet, the only real test of a prophetic message, is to rely on an open and receptive heart. Spiritual truth is not knowledge gained through intellect, or through logic and reason, not through use of the head. Spiritual truth is known and tested in the heart, a heart that is open, and receptive, and longs to know the truth of God, a heart that anticipates, and welcomes, and rejoices to know the will of God. True prophetic messages uphold and interpret and are judged in light of what we know and believe to be the divine truth – not what we may want to be the truth, not the world's truth – but the truth of God, truth felt in the heart, not rationalized in the head.

Centuries after Moses, and following many other prophets sent among God's chosen people, another man came into the world. He too would be judged as to whether he possessed the real Spirit of the Lord, whether he conformed to what religious people expected a true bearer of the divine message to be, whether his message could be trusted to carry the will of God. The Gospels tell us that some believed him to carry this truth, indeed to embody the divine truth; not just to carry and convey the ultimate and final word of God into the world, but to be the

ultimate and final Word of God in the world. But the Gospels also tell us that many more judged him not to possess the Holy Spirit, not to be a real prophet, not to be the Messiah, and so he was not given much time. The cruelty of crucifixion silenced Jesus' prophetic voice.

Or so they thought! For at Pentecost, the Spirit of God was released into the world, to be claimed by anyone who acknowledges Christ as Lord. And with each generation – in fact, with each individual – the same questions must be asked: Is there truth in the Gospel message? Do I trust – will I follow the Good News of the Gospel? And ultimately, is my heart open and receptive to the ultimate Word of God, the Son of God, Jesus Christ?

Each of us must ask ourselves: Is my heart open and willing to receive the saving message of Christ? Or do I, like so many others, close my heart, silencing the prophetic call of Jesus and never knowing for myself the divine truth and the will of God for my life?

You and I are challenged by the same questions posed by those ancient followers of Moses – the same questions faced by people of faith around the world and throughout the centuries. Tough questions. Tough choices. But, oh!, the glorious possibilities of being open to God's truth.

Amen.