

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Palisades Presbyterian Church
January 29, 2006

Readings: Deuteronomy 18: 15 – 20
Mark 1:21 – 28

Hymns: 136 Sovereign Lord of All Creation
127 Come O Spirit
268 God, Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens

Not Just the Prophet's Edge
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By all accounts, Moses was first in the line of prophets. The deuteronomical text was prepared to establish a path for the Hebrews to follow, as they stood outside the boundaries of the Promised Land. Moses was about to leave them. He is giving them his farewell, along with a reminder of who they were and how they were to maintain their faith in the times ahead.

The Bible tells us that the Hebrews had reached this point somewhere about 40 years after the Exodus from Egypt. There are a few estimates of when that date was, but 1440 BCE is generally accepted in both biblical and historical terms. So, our text this morning relates an event that took place about 3445 years ago, or approximately 1,258,286 days in the past!

That puts us somewhere in the 18th Dynasty in the time of the New Kingdom and between Thutmose III and Amenhotep II. Or, based on some other accounts, we're in the year 1240 BCE, during the time of Rameses II. Either way, it's the Late Bronze Age and Moses and the Hebrews are standing on the edge of Canaan, the Promised Land.

That's the time and location, as close as we can tell. And there are a lot of folk hanging around.

The estimated population of the Hebrews at the time varies wildly, from over 3 million to the tens of thousands. Part of the confusion is based on the Hebrew word "eleph," which was used to count the population in the Book of Numbers. Eleph means thousand, but it can also be used to mean military unit of clan. If we use the definition as 1,000, we end up in the three million range. If we use the military unit – we're in the tens of thousands. What we do know, is that part of the trouble the Hebrews had in Egypt was that their population was becoming too large and too threatening.

Not much more accuracy here in trying to establish the population of Egypt of the time. Historians produce numbers ranging from one to eight million, with six million around the time of the Romans. Either way, it is easy to see how an Egyptian Pharaoh might have been nervous about the size of the race and what a task Moses had in moving this mass of humanity through the desert for years.

But that time is past, Moses is outside of Canaan delivering his final words. Tradition, history, commitment, understanding – you could easily imagine all that he might have said – or read Deuteronomy to follow it in the text. For sure, he was reminding them of who they were, encouraging them to rely on their faith and what it means -- to carry them forward into the times ahead.

Such connection to history and meaning is not limited to any time or group. An article in The New York Times on January 22 fast-forwards us to today and the latest ways in which genetic genealogy studies, the newest of cottage industries, may be paths to our own ancestry, driven by an age-old need to tell our stories about our origins. Certainly, the writings of the Old Testament were driven by the same need to record their journeys and history so they would not be forgotten. Of course that same human curiosity would drive us to want to know what secrets of our lineage might be hidden in our DNA!

Who knows, such a process might be able to pin down the exact figures of population and time and place we seek for the estimated 300 billion people who have lived on this planet from its origin. I'm not sure what that will do for us, but I rely on some herald or marketer to tell me – when it's time!

Back to Mt. Horeb and the desert. Let's listen in as Moses tells the Hebrews: Don't worry. God will always place people before you to lead you, just as God made me your intermediary. There will be prophets to come. When they do come, listen to them. They will come from our own people and be raised up by God. Listen to them. They will speak to you in the name of God. Heed them and their warnings."

Or something like that, so the text tells us. And, in this desert, amidst an indeterminate number of people, in a setting without loudspeakers or multimedia presentation devices – Moses institutionalizes the role of the prophet and its role the Hebrew faith, setting into motion the prophecy of those who would follow: from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Hosea to Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

...Eventually on to Jesus, some would say Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and to today – when the slow diminishing of prophets seems to have been victim to the multiplying voices and images that threaten to overwhelm us into a modern day Babel or sorts.

I wonder if it is the modern-day increase in data and information that has obscured the voices of those we need to listen to. It may be no surprise that we find ourselves seeking more of an understanding or relationship with God in small communities like this and quiet thoughtful hearts like ours, rather than attempting to sort out all the data available, only to discover more is waiting to flood us in a new deluvian deluge of hyperlinked information.

As I write this, a curious metaphor strikes me to think that the floods of ancient times and their myths were naturalistic attempts to reboot a crashed system of peoples and values gone awry. Sort of like rebooting a crashed computer....

To tell you the truth, trying to sort this out can be a little challenging.

And, as if trying to understand the role of prophets in the First Testament wasn't enough in this morning's readings, we 1400 years forward to the Roman times and the ministry of Jesus in Mark's gospel. Mark, who writes with a brevity that compacts events of Jesus' life into hours rather than weeks and months, brings excites us with two images of Jesus in this morning's reading: that of teacher/prophet and healer/exorcist.

I have always seen Jesus as a teacher and a prophet. That was easy. Mark emphasizes this by writing of Jesus in the synagogue, teaching with authority, not as the scribes. The reference here is that Jesus was not educated solely from books as the scribes were, rather he spoke as one of the prophets that Moses referred to when he said that "the LORD will raise up a prophet like me from among you." In fact, some will argue, Jesus was the "one" to which Moses referred.

Jesus is in the synagogue, teaching with authority, infused in some way with the Spirit and the Electricity that captured and caused those hearing him to wonder – isn't this the son of Joseph and Mary? Isn't this the carpenter? What is going on here?

And Mark, in his compacted style, stirs up even more imagination and controversy and confusion when he integrates Jesus' teaching with the power to call out demons. Moses, prophets, Hebrews, Canaanites, Egyptians, Romans, thousands of years, millions of people, Jesus's teachings and now demons!

Get the feeling we're locked in an epic of enormous proportions?

About the demon story...Some suggest that the possessed person who calls out: "What have you to do with us?" was deranged, mentally ill, and unfortunately like some of those we sometimes see wandering the streets, speaking to no one in particular, threatening the air filled with those visible only to them.

Someone like that, perhaps, would have existed then, could have seen Jesus, and called out – “So what are you doing here? What business of yours are we and our lives? Get lost.”

Could have been, but the first words Jesus speaks, according to Mark, are the words that exorcists use, the formula, so to speak, first commanding the demon to be silent. And then, following the general process of such things, there is a wild convulsing event of some kind, the last thrashing of the demon in front of the exorcist, fighting for its demonic life, as the exorcist commands it to “Come out!” And so, in this event, it does....

I have never seen an exorcism. The Catholic Encyclopedia describes it as follows:

Assuming the reality of [demoniac possession](#), for which the authority of [Christ](#) is pledged, it is to be observed that [Jesus](#) appealed to His power over [demons](#) as one of the recognized signs of [Messiahship](#) ([Matthew 12:23, 28](#); [Luke 11:20](#)). He cast out [demons](#), He declared, by the finger or spirit of [God](#), not, as His adversaries alleged, by collusion with the [prince of demons](#) ([Matthew 12:24, 27](#); [Mark 3:22](#); [Luke 11:15, 19](#)); and that He exercised no mere [delegated](#) power, but a personal authority that was properly His own, is clear from the direct and imperative way in which He commands the [demon](#) to depart ([Mark 9:24](#); cf. [1:25](#) etc.): “He cast out the [spirits](#) with his word, and he healed all that were sick” ([Matthew 8:16](#)). Sometimes, as with the daughter of the [Canaanean](#) woman, the exorcism took place from a distance ([Matthew 15:22 sqq.](#); [Mark 7:25](#)). Sometimes again the [spirits](#) expelled were allowed to express their recognition of [Jesus](#) as “the Holy One of [God](#)” ([Mark 1:24](#)) and to complain that He had come to torment them “before the time”, i.e the time of their punishment ([Matthew 8:29 sqq.](#); [Luke 8:28 sqq.](#)). If [demoniac possession](#) was generally accompanied by some disease, yet the two were not confounded by [Christ](#), or the [Evangelists](#). In [Luke 13:32](#), for example, the [Master Himself](#) expressly distinguishes between the expulsion of [evil spirits](#) and the curing of disease.

I could find nothing at the Vatican website that had to do with exorcism. I searched the Papal See on exorcisms and demons and came up empty-handed.

However, I went to the [www.pcusa.org](#) site and, and in an article on the 2005 film, “The Exorcism of Emily Rose,” in which a Roman Catholic priest performed an exorcism on a 19 year old college girl in the 1970’s who later died – for which he was tried for her murder - an article by Sarah Price Brown of the Religion News Service said: [http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/2005/05473.htm](#)

Demonic possession is a real possibility in the Roman Catholic Church, which recognizes exorcism as a way to drive out evil spirits through ritual prayer. Pope John Paul II was said to have performed several exorcisms.

Most archdioceses have an exorcist on staff whose identity is typically kept secret, said Tod Tamberg, spokesman for the Los Angeles Archdiocese.

In 1999, the Vatican issued the first updated exorcism ritual since 1614. The revised rite urges exorcists to consult with medical experts before concluding that someone is possessed. [I couldn't find this.]

Well, by this point, – honestly, I didn't know where to go.

I could study these things, more than I have, for sure, meditate upon them, and look for the answers to questions elsewhere, but I knew as sure I stand here before you that I wasn't going to get to any answer, without coming up with more questions.

It became clear to me, in writing this morning, that I was getting to the point where I was exhausting everything that led up to the point where faith simply took over.

I've included in the bulletin a list of "supernatural acts" or "miracles" performed by Jesus. The summary is from the Jesus Institute and the web address is on the back of the sheet if you would like to seek it out. There are 34 miracles listed and sixty-one accounts of them by the evangelists and John.

I can't help wonder how many miracles have been attributed to Jesus or the power of Jesus or the power to which Jesus was able to tap into since his days on earth.

As I have said, I have not experienced exorcisms in any first hand way, however I have experienced what I call miracles, these - frequently as a result of the concentrated power of God, Spirit, or Authority that emanates from a group with has transformative ability. I have heard of healings at the hands of others who seemed to be able to concentrate this power or act as a conduit for this power to others. I thought of the healing power of sound and traced back the interaction with chakras and sounds, and chants, and their healing and restorative benefits. In many ways, miracles and healings are not all that uncommon – if we can see them. But, back to Jesus and his powers....

No where did I find accounts that came anywhere close to explaining how Jesus did what he did. A minister friend of mine has been hearing to say, "I believe Jesus, I am just not sure if I believe in him." I liked that for a while, because it captured the notion that some of this might have just been recorded as hyperbole

and hocus pocus to sell, protect, or define a rising religion in a variety of socio-economic times. It was glib, easy to say, and sort of suspended this brain frieze that accompanies trying to process the supernatural.

In the end, though, I had to discard the jingoistic inclination to wave away the fact reports that Jesus simply did things that no one else has done in the way and with the impact that he had.

In Jesus, in the incarnation of God in him, in the presence of the Spirit, which somehow all became one – was a connection to the prophet's edge on both sides. He was the one that came before and after all things.

When I can get this mind that strives for cognitive control to quiet for just a minute, a cosmic hammock on the spiritual periphery of things begins to sway, and I can see Jesus at either end and all of us in the middle of the edges – moving toward beyond, by doing the mission and ministry we are called to here.

I wonder, often, if become better at this relaxation of the mind to see what I know I miss, will I begin to see more of what the static and interference of the times obscures. Will I see more prophets, recognize more of the miraculous healing power of God, find more peace and faith than I imagined possible?

Even if this is as good as it gets, I can tell you that there are moments when I do feel the sway of the hammock. With all my shortcomings and imperfections, I do know that the Jesus of 2000 years ago, the Creator, and Spirit fills this universe and that as Jesus taught us, we need not be afraid.

Be not afraid, he said. God is with us and those around us – always. Be still, know that I am God, we are told, and be not afraid – the edges of the prophets are in good hands.

Still, doesn't mean I'm not going to wonder....

St. Augustine Faith is to believe, on the word of God, what we do not see, and its reward is to see and enjoy what we believe.