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We Need a Prophet Like Moses

a sermon on Deuteronomy 18.15-19

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Moses' life was almost over. Israel had come to depend on him. Yes, there had been rough times along the way. More than once they tried to fire him and appoint a new leader, but they discovered that God had chosen Moses, so the matter was not in their hands. Those days were long gone, however. Forty years of wandering in the wilderness had mellowed them. The new generation about to enter the promised land did not remember Egypt. Moses was all they knew. God had sustained and guided them. Their lives clearly hung on grace alone, for they ate manna from heaven. They had learned reverence and fear of the Lord. God was good to them, but God is holy and not to be taken casually. So Moses was important for them, because Moses was a mediator between Holy God and his people Israel. His death would mark a major transition in the life of the nation and of every individual Israelite.

In Deuteronomy Moses gave them the law a second time and led them to renew their covenant with God. In the midst of giving various laws, he suddenly gave them a promise from God. God would send them another prophet like Moses. The reason this promise shows up here may be that God had just forbidden sorcery, magic, astrology, divination, seeking oracles from the dead, and all that sort of thing. You see the logic. God does not want them to do these things. They are to worship God alone and look to him alone for guidance in life. As long as Moses is around, why would they look anywhere else? They have the source right there. But once he is gone, they will be tempted to seek guidance from other sources. "What does God want me to do?" thinks the Israelite, "I don't know. I miss Moses." So the Israelite gets a Ouija board or a Tarot deck or tries to summon the spirit of dear ol' grampa – or Moses! Much later, King Saul consulted a witch to try to contact the deceased prophet Samuel. God's judgment on him was that for once that sort of thing worked, and when he got Samuel, he wished he hadn't.

God's people need guidance. Of course, they had it in the Law. Also, Joshua stepped into Moses' role as leader very well. Still, a prophet like Moses ... the promise comforted them. God would make his will crystal clear by sending a wonder-working, Spirit-filled prophet who would say, "Thus says the Lord!"

Jews have tended to take this promise to mean God would send a succession of inspired prophets, and they see its fulfillment in the string of Old Testament prophets who

spoke for God: Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and that crowd. The difficulty with this reading, of course, is that there never was another prophet to equal the stature of Moses. What does it mean “a prophet *like me*”? Like Moses in what way? Simply someone with the vocation to speak for God? Because no other prophet was ever quite like Moses.

Christians naturally see this promise fulfilled in Jesus. In the first century, when Jesus came preaching and teaching, some Jews believed prophecy had ceased. They had the scriptures. That was all the guidance they needed. Others, however, longed for the return of prophecy and the rise of an authentic prophet. They lived in troubled times. Whom should they follow to do God’s will? The Sadducees, who collaborated with the Romans? The Pharisees who said to kill Romans? The Pharisees who said to wait for God to kill the Romans? The Essenes? Or someone else? One thing was certain: They wanted God to do something new and exciting to rescue them. They wanted a new exodus to freedom and a renewal of their covenant with God. They wanted proof that after all these years, God had not forgotten them, but was ready to come to their aid. So when John the Baptist appeared in the guise of an old time prophet, they flocked to him. They began to hope that God was on the loose once again. Crowds had the same reaction to Jesus. The consensus about him was that he was a prophet. That was the category they already had that they could fit him into easiest. Of course, Jesus has never fit into anyone’s categories but his own. Yet the point stands, they were enthusiastic because they wanted a prophet, because life is confusing. Wouldn’t it be great to have a charismatic leader who shouts, “Thus says the Lord!” and you know just what to do?

We need a prophet like Moses today. Why? Because we are convinced life is a journey, but we are not sure there is a destination. Talk about wandering in the wilderness! We struggle to find spiritual or even physical roots. Once upon a time, you graduated, got a job, and settled down; and that was your life. You lived in the same place. You worked for the same company. Now you graduate; you work; you change jobs; you move three times; you go back to school; you change careers, you move three more times; and work for three more companies. We live in a mobile society in which everything around us is constantly changing. I’m not saying this is good or bad; it just is. And one consequence of all this bouncing around is that we struggle to find clear guidance. What job do I take? What career do I prepare for? Whom do I marry? Do I stay married? Our lives have become a string of big, important, difficult decisions. Have you ever wished God would speak to you in an audible voice and tell you what to do?

We wander physically and we wander spiritually. These days people change churches frequently. They switch denominations too, sometimes without bothering to inquire what the differences are. I suspect they base their decision on personal taste rather than the soundness of a church’s teaching and practice. After all, how do you know which

church is closest to the truth? How many people have given up on religion altogether, not because they became convinced God is not there, but because they simply could not sort out all the competing religious messages? Many people don't believe Truth, with a capital T, even exists. But how do they know? How do we judge right from wrong? There are so many voices screaming at us today – religious and secular – about how we ought to live, the things we ought to believe, and the values we ought to hold. How do we sort it out? Wouldn't it be great to have a prophet like Moses? All the clamoring and confusion falls silent in an instant, and clear, pure truth rings out with the force of a bugle call.

Think of what a prophet like Moses would mean to the Christian church – to our denomination and many others. A new Moses could lead us out of our cultural captivity! We Presbyterians have already been wandering in the wilderness for the past forty years about sexual issues. We could finally enter the promised land of clear teaching and holy practice. I would welcome a prophet like Moses just to end the frustrating debates about ordination and the nature of marriage. Moses explained all that pretty clearly the first time, but perhaps we would listen to a new Moses.

I think every person would welcome a source of pure truth, a place they could turn to find guidance, someone who could give definitive answers to the questions: Who am I? What am I doing here? What does my life mean? Someone to show me who I am and what I am supposed to be and how to find my way through all the tricky decisions that make up my life. Who wouldn't want that? You can understand why most people think it is impossible. It would be too good to be true. So they conclude it is unreasonable to hope for anything like that, instead we just have to muddle through and make our own identity and do the best we can. But that's lonely and hazardous. Like ships with no lighthouse, sooner or later we run aground.

The good news is: We do have a prophet like Moses: Jesus! Christians have always believed that *Jesus* uniquely fulfilled God's promise to send another prophet like Moses. You can find this throughout the New Testament. Matthew, for example, organized his gospel into five sections to parallel the five books of Moses in the Old Testament. In that same gospel, Jesus goes up onto the mountain to give God's laws – the sermon on the mount – just as Moses went up on Mount Sinai and gave the law to Israel. Just as Moses was miraculously saved from Pharaoh's order to kill Hebrew boys, so Jesus was miraculously saved from Herod's similarly wicked order. On the mount of transfiguration, Jesus shone with the brightness of God's glory, just as Moses had when he had to veil his face because the glory was too much for the people to bear. I could go on. When we read the Bible we are supposed to pick up on this: Jesus fulfills the promise.

Jesus saved his people. He taught them who God is. He told them how to live as God's people. He is that prophet promised in Deuteronomy ... and yet ... he is so much more.

For example, in the sermon on the mount, Jesus spoke with an authority Moses never had when he said, "You have heard that it was said" – and then he quoted from the law of Moses – "but I say to you ..." Moses was a messenger, a prophet in the true sense of one who spoke for God: God's mouthpiece. Jesus was much more than that. He was the lawgiver. He spoke with God's own authority.

Another example, this one from John, chapter 6: Jesus miraculously fed a crowd of over 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish. The people were amazed. They were excited. They knew their scriptures. They saw what this might mean: Jesus just might be the prophet like Moses promised in Deuteronomy! After all, Moses fed the children of Israel with manna in the wilderness. Here they were, kind of in a wilderness, hungry. And Jesus broke the bread and kept on breaking it until everyone had eaten his or her fill! John says they tried to seize Jesus by force and make him their king.

Jesus was on to them, however. He knew they were only after more bread. So he gave them the slip. Later they found him, and they asked him, "What does God want us to do?" That's exactly the sort of question an Israelite would ask the prophet like Moses. Jesus told them, "Believe on the one God has sent." And they said, "OK, sure, but what sign are you going to give us so that we can believe?" They wanted a sign, you see. After all, Moses had given signs. They even suggested a really effective one: "Moses gave our ancestors bread from heaven. Why don't you do that?" You see their line of reasoning. It's pretty clear that they think Jesus is the prophet like Moses. They have a category to put him in, a label to stick on him, to understand him by: he's a new Moses. And they are pleased by that.

But once again, Jesus refuses to fit himself into anyone's preconceived ideas. He rejects their identification. He scolds them, "Moses did not give your ancestors manna. *My Father* did! He gives the true bread from heaven." Well, of course, they want this bread. That's when he tells them, "I am the Bread of Life."

Jesus thought they had the analogy turned around. He wasn't Moses. He was the bread. He was the manna. He was the grace-filled, life-giving sustenance from the Father. This they found much harder to accept. Jesus goes way beyond Moses. Yes, he fulfills the promise, but he so surpasses Moses that he shatters the old categories and redefines what they mean. Jesus is the prophet like Moses, but he is so much more. He is nothing less than Almighty God in the flesh. The Word incarnate. The eternal Son of the Father. He is everything Israel hoped for in a prophet like Moses – everything we might dream of too – and much, much more.

The book of Hebrews puts it this way:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. [1.1-3]

The gospel of John says:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. [1.14-18]

This is exciting good news for us, living as we do in our own kind of wilderness. Our journey does have a destination, and it is a good one. We do have an authentic identity and a way of living that matches our identity. We have a destiny and a mission along the way. Best of all, we do have a clear, pure source of trustworthy truth. Yet Jesus does so much more than just give us answers! He makes us who we are. He is our destination. He is our life.

Think about it. Most people would be happy if they had a completely trustworthy source of truth and guidance. But that's not enough! Jesus is much more than an oracle who informs us how we ought to live. Moses did that. Moses transmitted God's laws to Israel, "Here is how God wants you to live." A lot of good it did! When did God's people ever keep his laws? Rarely if ever! And let's not point the finger. Jesus has given us plenty of instructions about how to live as God's people. And do we follow them? Very, very imperfectly. The problem has never been that we did not know what God wants. The problem, rather, has been that we want something else. And that's a big problem—a rift between God's will and ours. In this situation we need more than just clear instructions. We need forgiveness, reconciliation, and new hearts. We need grace. We need to be taught who we really are. We need to be picked up, cleaned off, and restored to our rightful place in creation. We need adoption as children of God. And all this is exactly what Jesus does for us!

Moses led the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Jesus frees us from slavery to sin and death. Of course, *God* delivered his people from Egypt. Moses was just his agent. Jesus is more than an agent. Jesus is God, so he did for us what Moses could not have done. He died for us and took our sins. Again we see it: Jesus is like Moses, but even better.

Now what of the skeptic's objection that this is simply too good to be true? If a prophet like Moses is more than we can reasonably hope for, then how do we dare trust ourselves to the good news that Jesus is God in the flesh? These days we are reluctant to trust anyone, especially someone who claims to speak for God – and rightly so! How then can we give ourselves so completely into the hands of someone who claimed to be God? These days, even people who believe Truth (with a capital T, objective truth) exists are hesitant to believe they have found it. How then can we surrender ourselves to one who claims to be *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*?

One reason we might dare is because of the power of the gospel to make sense of life. The gospel explains and illuminates your life better than anything else can. It passes the test of making the most sense of our experience. But this may not be enough. After all, you are not being asked to subscribe to a set of ideas. You are being asked to trust a person. How do you normally decide a person is worthy of your trust? You get to know him or her. How do you decide Jesus is worthy of your ultimate trust? You get to know him, through the scriptures, through the witness of the Holy Spirit. God works in your mind and heart.

Those of us who have passed that point of decision know that Jesus is not too good to be true. He is true. Besides, who's to say what is too good to be true? What does that even mean? If God is good, how can anything in his creation be too good to be true? We are rightly skeptical of advertisements that promise too much or religious figures who make audacious claims. Jesus is different. His death for you. His resurrection on the third day. They prove he is sincere.

I invite you, therefore, to look to Jesus as the goal and purpose of your life. In our confusing world, he is your lighthouse, your one infallibly trustworthy point of reference to guide your journey. He will give you freedom. He will lead you home.

I close with a quote from the Barmen Declaration: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." Amen.

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