

“Principles for Prophets”
Deuteronomy 18:15-22
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4th Sunday after Epiphany
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Deuteronomy is written as a sort of memoir of Moses, a speech from Moses telling people how they must live. Some scholars call it a kind of polity or constitution for the whole life of the people.¹

Like the US Constitution this one has some foundational values, laws and principles that will govern the people, and a whole section on what might be called leadership and institutions where this text is located. There are checks and balances built into the system. All leaders are under the authority of God as expressed in Torah. There is a judicial system whose judges have two basic prohibitions – do not show partiality and do not accept bribes. There will be a king when they get settled in the land whose primary job is to be the model Israelite for everyone else. The king is prohibited from taking too many horses and too many wives, and must keep a copy of the law within reading distance so he doesn’t start thinking of himself as better than his constituents. There are the priests (also known as the Levites) who keep the worship system going. They make the sacrifices. In return the people have to share enough for them to live off of. And then there are the high-stakes prophets that we read about today from the 18th chapter of Deuteronomy, verses 15 through 22.

¹⁵ The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet^[d] like me [Moses] from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.^[e] ¹⁶ This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: “If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.” ¹⁷ Then the Lord replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet^[f] like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet,^[g] who shall speak to them everything that I command. ¹⁹ Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet^[h] shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰ But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.” ²¹ You may say to yourself, “How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?” ²² If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.

¹ Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, (Louisville: John Knox Press), 1990, pp. 11ff.

Talk about high stakes. “Any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak – that prophet shall die.” It raises the preacher’s occupational hazard to a new level. “You say something in my name that I didn’t tell you to say” – you’re dead. God comes across almost like Tommy DeVito’s character in the mob film *Goodfellas*. “You think I’m here to amuse you or something?” Maybe I need to rewrite the pre-sermon prayer I’ve been speaking all these years – “Lord, may the words of my mouth be acceptable in your sight so I can live to see another day.”

I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised to see this high stakes faith in Deuteronomy. It’s a book that offers clarity. “I’ve set before you life and death, blessing and curses,” God says later in the book, “Choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19). I tend to shy away from that kind of binary thinking. I prefer the tensions and paradoxes of faith, not the absolutes. I resonate more with the muddy waters of faith, than with the clarity of rules and principles.

But clarity is probably what you need when you’re preparing to carve out a functioning society in the middle of the wilderness on your way to the promised land especially when you’re leaving behind a society built on the fear of a dictator in favor of one built on the promises of God. Clarity is probably what you need. Clarity that God is the one God that you have to obey. Clarity about the ten commandments that undergird your law. Clarity about the prophet who will speak in the name of the LORD. And clarity about principles that will govern that prophet’s power.

And when it comes to *prophetic* power, there’s good reason to keep the stakes high. Every position of power carries with it the potential for abuse. The more authority we give to someone – whether they be a team doctor to young gymnasts, or police officers in a gun trace task force unit, or the CEO of company or a school system, or the President of a nation – the more power we give, the higher the potential for abuse. Prophets as far as I can tell are held to the highest standard because they speak in the name of the LORD. And when you speak in the name of God, the potential for abuse is magnified. All you have to do is meet anyone who has ever been abused by a pastor or priest to hear from them the double wounds that come from someone you trust to speak or act in the name of God. “Any prophet who . . . presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.” High stakes.

But the stakes are high for another reason according to Deuteronomy: the community that doesn’t heed God’s voice is vulnerable to its own destruction. The prophet gives direction to the community and its leaders. She speaks of values the community must follow for its own wellbeing. He offers direction that any community needs to know to prioritize its energy, resources, and focus. The community must hear the voice of God for the sake of its own life.

The church has tried to build in the space for that kind of prophetic utterance within it’s own architecture of faith. The office of the pastorate, for example, has very little power within a Presbyterian Church. The Session governs everything – from the times and places for worship, to who is authorized to receive the sacrament of baptism, to when communion is served, to the educational and music programs of the church, to the budget. Yet when it comes to the pulpit, the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church makes clear that the preacher selects the

Scripture that will be read and the preacher prepares the sermon that will be delivered.² It's the church trying to institutionalize space in its own life for the destabilizing voice of God. The 16th century Swiss Confession of Faith goes so far as to say "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God."³

It's that destabilizing voice that strengthened some church folks to face the mobs of Jim Crow and others to preach desegregation to the white congregations who opposed it. It's that destabilizing voice that launched abolitionist movements and their colleges of higher learning that doubled as stops along the Underground Railroad. It's that destabilizing voice that led women to demand their right not simply on the basis of our constitution but on the theological conviction that gave rise to it – that all people are created equal. It's that destabilizing voice that led to the ordination of women, and LGBTQ Christians, and continues to agitate congregations like ours into welcoming people with disabilities with justice instead of begrudging charity. It's that destabilizing voice that causes people to leave church on Sundays and do crazy things that scare even the preacher like quitting your job, or adopting a child, or ending an unhealthy relationship, or demanding what's right, or offering forgiveness.

Still, we should never confuse the office of the prophet with the institution of the church or with the pastorate. The claim of Deuteronomy is that God chooses whoever God wants to be a prophet. Sometimes God's choice lines up with the expected position-holders. Sometimes God throws them out. Whoever God wants to speak on behalf of God, God chooses. The only real qualification is that the prophet come from among your own people. The only real role for the prophet is to speak the truth.

We've heard that truth from countless numbers of women over the past several months as our society hear a clear demand for justice from women demanding equality and dignity and respect in workplaces, universities, and public spaces. Women speaking for an end to sexual harassment and an end to sex abuse. More than 150 women and girls came forward over the past couple of weeks to speak the truth about the pain that Dr. Nassar caused them as the official doctor for US gymnasts and for many other female athletes. Last week he was convicted of abuse and sentenced to what amounts to life in prison.

Rachael Denhollander was the first woman to publicly accuse Dr. Nassar of abuse. Like so many of the women who had tried to come forward before she was attacked by the very institutions who should have come to her aid. And yet she pressed ahead determined that the truth is enough to defeat tyrants of every kind. She pressed ahead when officials from Michigan State publicly discredited her. She pressed ahead.

Facing her accuser last week in court she quoted C.S. Lewis, words that she clung to through the difficult days of her efforts, where C.S. Lewis says that his argument against God was that the universe seems so cruel and unjust.

² *The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, W-1.4005.

³ The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.004, *The Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.)*

“How did I get this idea of just, unjust?” he said. “A man does not call a line crooked unless he first has some idea of straight. What was I comparing the universe to when I called it unjust?”⁴

“Larry,” she said to the convicted doctor, “I can call what you did evil and wicked because it was. And I know it was evil and wicked because the straight line exists. The straight line is not measured based on your perception or anyone else's perception, and this means I can speak the truth about my abuse without minimization or mitigation. And I can call it evil because I know what goodness is. And this is why I pity you. Because when a person loses the ability to define good and evil, when they cannot define evil, they can no longer define and enjoy what is truly good.”⁵

Sounds to me like a prophet. Like many women before her including Tarana Burke, the African-American survivor of abuse who is the real founder of the #metoo movement. Prophets who make clear to us that the issue is not only the consistent way that our world has dismissed the testimony of women's experience, but the way our world tries to dismiss truth itself.

Prophets who find a way to speak the truth authorized by no one save the voice of God. People God raises up when the stakes are high for the good of all the people. People God raises up to speak the truth when people act like they don't know what truth is. The voice of God warning people that justice isn't something you can call fake news when it doesn't suit your interests. Right and wrong can't be defined according to expediency. They are foundational for a functioning society and for a good life. Prophets sent save us.

When Jesus taught in Capernaum, lots of people heard about him. Many were amazed by him. Some followed. Others saw him as a threat to their power. He taught us some things we still resist: Loving God and loving your neighbor can't be separated from each other. Justice is defined by the wellbeing of the most vulnerable among us. Peace is possible but won't be achieved through the sword. He spoke for God – that destabilizing voice sent when the stakes are high to save a people. All we have to do is listen.

⁴ I believe this is a quote from C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

⁵ Rachel Denhollander, Victim Impact Statement, January 24, 2018, reprinted on CNN, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/24/us/rachael-denhollander-full-statement/index.html>