

A Prophet Like Us

^{NRS} **Deuteronomy 18:9** When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you must not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. ¹⁰ No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, ¹¹ or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. ¹² For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the LORD; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the LORD your God is driving them out before you. ¹³ You must remain completely loyal to the LORD your God. ¹⁴ Although these nations that you are about to dispossess do give heed to soothsayers and diviners, as for you, the LORD your God does not permit you to do so. ¹⁵ The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. 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 like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.

Every family I know has at least one person for whom life has been a struggle. A person you're just concerned about- worried about. Are they gonna be able to make it? And if they aren't- what's going to happen to them?

We have a few of these folks in my family. Heck, in high school when I moved out for a year, I was one of them, too. Probably still am in some of their minds. Well one of these people in my family I didn't meet or even know until I was just starting seminary.

When my mom's mom, my Grandma Cashdollar was alive, we would gather at her house every 4th of July since I can remember. We'd set up the badminton and the croquet. We'd set up the picnic tables and the chairs. And in spite of my brother and I pleading with her not to, Grandma would be out there spraying this terrifying looking bottle of insecticide marked "Yard Guard" underneath all the tables. It created this kind of thick, thick fog that was linger in the air for a good five minutes or so. If I end up

growing another head or something out of my neck, I'm pretty sure it's going to be thanks to Yard Guard.

Now for the most part the same 10 to 15 people would show up. It was basically my mom's closest family. Over time of course fewer and fewer people would play badminton and more and more opted for croquet or for just sitting down. And while there was always conversation about politics and the Pittsburgh Pirates, eventually more and more we talked about everyone's health and the various kinds of aches and pains everyone was experiencing. And this was fine, but every once in a while new family would show up bringing some much needed new blood- family I hadn't met; sometimes family I hadn't even heard about. One year a mother and daughter pair showed up that fell into this category.

The mom had been married to my Grandmother's cousin. The daughter, in her late 40's when we first met, well as we got to know her we would learn that she was one of those people who has kind of struggled here and there kind of all her life. When we met she was doing great. She was living on her own, waiting tables for a living. Given that this side of the family is extremely prim and proper and filled with a whole bunch of college professors and scientists- this seemed incredibly exotic to me that she waited tables for a living. It was like on that side of the family you didn't even know that was an option. And this woman was quiet at first, but after a while she warmed up and turned out to be very funny- funny with a wry, dark sense of humor. And there was just something about her that was mysterious.

Well some new people came once or twice and we never saw them again. These two kept coming. And as the years went by and they continued to come- every year we'd

learn a little bit more. We finally learned that she had lived with depression all her life, and when she was younger, she began to self-medicate as so many who suffer from mental illness, as a way to cope. And then, what started out as a small problem grew into a bigger one. Starting with alcohol she eventually made her way all the way to heroin, falling into prostitution in order to support her habit. Now she was clean when we knew her, but the scars of those years, physically and emotionally, they don't go away.

Well every family has people that struggle, people whose scars are right out there in the open for everyone to see.

The family of faith is no different. One of the ways I think about the Bible is like a crazy detailed family tree- with everyone in their related to me, related to us. And some of these folks we're proud of- and some we worry about. Now, this may be surprising to some of you, but I the Israelites actually saw Moses more as one of the ones they worry about. Oh I know, I know- you've all seen Moses. He was Charlton Heston in the Ten Commandments. He was going toe to toe with Yule Brenner and shouting in a sonorous voice, "LET MY PEOPLE GO!" The Moses we envision is this confident, self-assured, alpha male, with a huge beard, a giant staff, and this really short fuse. The Moses we think of is Michaelangelo's Moses- rippling with muscles and a look on his face like, "Don't you even THINK about it, mister."

But honestly and with all due respect to Charlton Heston- our idea of Moses really doesn't have much to do with the Bible. It has more to do with what we imagine a prophet, a leader is like, or should be like- but maybe not so much with how God imagines them to be like.

Think about Moses. Right from the start he had a tough life. Now we know why his mom put him in that basket and sent him down the river, we know she didn't want the Egyptians to kill him. But still- his mom put him in a basket and sent him down the river. That's a tough thing for a child to swallow. And it effected him- not really Egyptian and not really Hebrew, Moses grew up kind of in the middle. And it marked him so much that on that hot day, do you remember this, on that hot day out there in the desert when that Egyptian man was beating that Hebrew slave, something just broke inside of Moses. And that outsider snapped. He killed that Egyptian. But rather than own up to it, he buried the man in the sand. And if he thought the Hebrews would see him as a hero he had another thing coming- they just saw him as a murderer, unstable, someone they couldn't trust. So he ran again- out into the deserts. And he lived there as a hired hand for years until God spoke to him out of that bush.

So far we're not talking about a very distinguished history here, are we? Abandoned by his parents. A known murderer. And then a runaway, a vagrant, working as a hired hand. Not exactly the stuff of legend here.

But then it gets worse. When God speaks to him through that bush, calling him out as a prophet, telling him to go back to Egypt and to save his people, how does Moses respond? First he questions who God is in the first place, wanting to know God's name, wanting something he can hang his hat on. And when he doesn't get this he pushes back again saying he really isn't a good speaker- he stutters and stumbles over his words. God says fine- and God says Aaron, his brother, will do the talking for him. And yeah this is something the movie the Ten Commandments just kind of skips over. Then finally, when Moses has tried to weasel out of everything- he just tells God no. He tells God no. And

then finally Exodus says the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses, and it's only then that Moses gets the idea that maybe it might be a good idea to head back to Egypt.

If the Israelites were walking down the street they wouldn't even give Moses a passing glance. His parents gave him away. He was raised as an Egyptian- not a Jew. He was a murderer. And anytime the pressure was on he took off like a jack rabbit. Every family has at least someone they worry about- Moses was definitely one of those kids.

Of course things turned out pretty well for him. He did end up going back to Egypt. He did confront Pharaoh. And he did lead the people through the wilderness, right up to the edge of a new land, a land of promise. We hear a little bit of this in our text this morning. Our text today comes from the book of Deuteronomy. Whenever I think about this book, I always hear that little piece from the musical Cats about "Old Deuteronomy". Deuteronomy is an amazing book. While the books in the first section of the Bible, the section called the Pentateuch or the Torah, are pretty much a collection of simple stories with some of those great genealogies and legal codes sprinkled in to keep your interest up, Deuteronomy does something MUCH more interesting.

Deuteronomy is basically a sermon series that Moses is giving the people right before they enter into the promised land- and the writer uses these sermons to tell the story of the people's escape from Egypt, their wandering in the desert, all as a way of preparing them for the days ahead.

And in the section we're looking at this morning Moses is talking about all the leaders God is going to raise up in the new land- earlier he talks about the priests, and the

kings, and in our section he's talking about the prophets- the people who help the community keep an ear out for God, maybe the most important job a culture can have. But these prophets aren't going to look like you might expect.

Now when we first read this text, I know this doesn't sound very nice. All these words against the Canaanites. When I first read this, I thought there is no way I'm preaching on that. I mean to our very tolerant ears this just sounds like typical religious chauvinism- the kind of stuff that gives all of us a bad name. But honestly, I don't think this is so.

See Moses doesn't tell us the prophets in Canaan are bad because they're not Jewish- he says they're bad because of what they're doing. And the list when you really look at it, is awful. First thing on the list- he talks about the practice of passing young people through the fire. And you say- well what the heck is that? Is that like those people walking over hot coals- heck, that's not such a bad idea with some of these young people, right? Maybe they'd be a little more respectful now and again. Well no, this isn't what this is about. This phrase "passing young people through the fire" refers to a literal practice of child sacrifice. Part of what passed for religion in Canaan was a barbaric practice of offering up children, children to the god named Moloch. Believe it or not this practice never really died out. And in Christ's own day, the word he uses that our Bible translates as 'hell' is the word Gehenna. In Greek this is just the name for a literal place- for the Gehenna valley right next to Jerusalem. It's the place used for a dump as well as where some continued to worship Moloch by offering up their little ones.

What Moses is saying here is that true prophets, prophets God raises up- they will not support this, they will not perpetrate violence in the name of religion. Still relevant?

You bet. How much blood has been shed because of people passing themselves off as prophets from whatever religious tradition, whipping a people up until they actually believe God not only is ok with killing, but actually blesses their crusades as Holy.

More important than this, though, is who gets to be a prophet. There's a long list of names for the prophets in the land. Sorcerers, augurers, diviners. And in the last century we've actually learned a ton about what scholars call the ancient magical tradition in the ancient world. And what we've learned is that the ancient world was practically crawling with all kinds of prophets who people would hire to try and get God or the gods on their side- if you wanted someone to fall in love with you their were love spells, if you wanted things to happen to your enemy there were spells for that, too. And these prophets- they weren't like what you might expect. They weren't low lifes who hung out in seedy side shops. They were largely famous and incredibly well respected people. They were people with education. People a bit like Charlton Heston- people who were tall, good looking, and commanding. People you could almost imagine could make a god do what you wanted them to do for you. Not just anyone could be a prophet, you see- only the best. Only the brightest.

And it is to this that Moses says no. Moses says the prophets God raises up will not be like these men, and they were mostly men- they would be like who? They would be like him. He says two times- God will raise up for you a prophet like me. A prophet like me. A prophet like Moses? A prophet who, like Moses, didn't grow up in the church. A prophet who, like Moses, ran into trouble with the law. A prophet who, like Moses, ran away so many times you knew this was not a guy you could really count on but someone you just had to hope in. A prophet, in other words, who wrestled with life

and who couldn't hide his scars as easily as some can. A prophet, in other words, like most of us- if we're being honest.

You know the thing about that person who started coming to our family reunions on the 4th? When I met her I was just starting seminary, and she made it absolutely clear from the get go she was not religious, don't talk to her about the church, thank you, good night. And that wasn't the first time I've encountered that. I'm get it. And I completely understand folks who've been hurt by the church. We've left quite a wake haven't we? I'll be honest, sometimes I wonder whether the church has done more harm than good some days.

But here's the thing. The more I got to know her the more I realized she may not be religious, not in any kind of official sense anyway, but she was an incredibly spiritual person- she listened when people talked to her, really listened. And when she spoke back to them it was with a gentleness, a kindness. And one time, when I was talking to someone else and mentioned Thomas Merton, this incredible Roman Catholic monk and peace advocate- she jumped right in and it turned out she'd probably read more of him than I had. And, after she realized I had no interest in churching her to death- we started to talk more and more about life and the life of the soul, and I realized she was one of those rare people who had actually was learning something from her life- she was someone who could see God's presence in her life in the life of others. She was a prophet, in other words.

Like Moses she probably doesn't seem like much at first. If you saw her on the street, you wouldn't stop. You would not remark upon her. Her education wasn't

impressive. Her job wasn't impressive. And then tack on an incredibly painful history with drugs and it's underworld- she's someone who would be really easy to overlook or write off. But as our family has stopped gathering for the 4th, I realize she is one of the people I most miss being with, a person with an uncommon depth, a person with eyes for the truth.

Moses tells us God will raise up prophets- God will raise up men and women who seek out God's presence in their own lives and the lives of others. And these prophets will be like him- people who maybe don't do all that well at public speaking, people who aren't all that sure of themselves, people who maybe didn't even grow up in a faith tradition and don't even feel at home in one anymore.

Moses doesn't tell us how many there are. I like to think the number is as big as we are willing to make it. I believe every day when you get up in the morning, God is raising up a prophet. Because every day you have the ability to speak words of truth, or not. You have the ability to show the world your God is one of love, or not.

What do you say, friends? What are you being raised up to say and do today, tomorrow, and the day after that? I know we don't believe in ourselves. We think about all the things we can't do, can't say, all the things we're not. But you know what? None of that's important. What's important isn't what we can do- what's important is what God can do through us. This morning I want to hear from all the prophets. Let every prophet here this morning say Amen. **Amen.**