

**BIBLE STUDY
ON THE LECTIONARY**

January 24, 2018

Lessons for January 28 – The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

The difference between a heretic and a prophet is time.

Some things take time for us to know whether someone was telling the truth (or not).

Sometimes the Old Testament prophets were seen as *mad men* (such as Ezekiel and Isaiah).

So how will we know? And who are our modern day prophets?

It is easy to ignore people who prophesy the end of the world on a specific date and time.

But we are challenged by others whose predictions might ring true but only time will tell.

It is better to define prophets as spokespeople for God.

For the last 2 Sundays, the Old Testament lessons have featured the prophets Samuel and Jonah. We discerned their effectiveness by what they said and did.

In the case of Samuel, we read that his words came from the Lord and were accurate. ✓

In the case of Jonah, the people of Nineveh repented and God relented from destroying them. ✓

In this short lesson, Moses describes the kind of prophet that God sanctions.

He anticipates their question – *How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?*

If a true prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place ...

the prophet spoke it presumptuously. Do not be frightened by it.

It still does not answer the question (in my opinion).

Our lesson is in the middle of a set of instructions given to Israel to live in a socially closed community. The people were not to mingle with the cultures around it or imitate their abhorrent practices. The authors of Deuteronomy are looking back on what actually happened to Israel as they acclimated itself to its neighbors.

Reflections that arise from this text:

How do we determine who speaks for God?

Invitation is open for all of us to be prophets ...

we are to watch over our own words and do our best to speak rightly about God.



Psalm 111 and 112

The psalm summarizes God's authority, his accomplishments, and his distinct qualities.

<i>Authority</i>	God is the true Lord of all
<i>Accomplishments</i>	God established and kept his covenants
	God provided food for his people
	God redeemed his people
	God showed people the power of his works
<i>Qualities</i>	God is gracious and merciful and ever mindful of his covenant
	His name is holy and awesome

The Psalm Defines Our Relationship with God

Usually those with such a combination of attributes and accomplishments remain at arm's length from the community but not our God. God connects with his people and encourages a profound intimacy with those who obey his laws with faithfulness and uprightness. Those who practice the fear of the Lord are given wisdom. The psalmist gives witness to this intimacy by giving thanks to the Lord with his *whole heart*. He puts his whole self on-the-line in the midst of the congregation.

Presence

God is with us forever.

His righteousness endures forever. His laws are established forever.

He has command of his covenant relationship with us. And we offer our praise to him.

The psalmist introduces us to God and we have an opportunity to introduce God to others.

It encourages us to lead lives that mirror God.

Psalm 111 and 112 belong together.

They are similar in organization. Both are acrostic poems (contain 22 lines).

They use similar words and phrases (upright, gracious and merciful, providers).

Both focus heavily on the future.

Psalm 111 is focused on the deeds of the Lord.

Psalm 112 is focused on the deeds of those who fear the Lord.

Those that fear the Lord are expected to imitate the Lord.

Those who find great delight in his commands are capable of mirroring his deeds.

Psalm 111 comes first – it is only because our Lord is already gracious and merciful and just that we are at all capable of being the same way.

As we look at Mark 1 – The author also highlights Jesus' accomplishments and attributes.

He teaches as one with authority and rebukes and even tames unclean spirits.

Reflections that arise from this text:

What does it mean to give thanks to God with our whole heart?

What does it mean to obey laws with faithfulness and uprightness?

Do we have wisdom?

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

What is the relationship between individual freedom and responsibility for the overall health of a community? The question is asked within the context of eating idol meat.

- Verses 1-3 There is a contrast between knowledge and love.
- Verses 4-6 The Corinthians state their theological reasoning.
- Verses 7-12 An ethical argument settles the issue in a broader context.

Paul concludes with – *Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.*

The message of this passage is about how ...
cultural and ethnic people reorder and reorient their lives when met by the gospel of Christ.
The Corinthians had to discern their new faith in the context of cultural diversity.
It was true for the people of Israel as well (as noted in Deuteronomy).

Each was called to surrender old ways of living and to embrace new Christian values.
The values were based on obedience to Jesus Christ – faith, hope and love.
Instead of worshipping many gods, they were called to a monotheistic faith.
Their identities were not changed (or erased) ... however faith in God became their primary lens through which they defined and saw themselves.

The question of loyalty to God becomes a requirement and a confession.
Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior and replaces everything else.
What are some modern forms of idolatry?
What would Paul call us out on?
Are we drifting from Christ?

Anything can be a stumbling block to faith.
Paul warns the Corinthians to be aware of their life choices.

The real question is not whether one has deeper knowledge that puffs up but that one exhibits love which builds up. The mark of true knowledge is not special privileges restricted to a few but a love for God that demonstrates concern for other believers.

Paul imagines that the *strong* Corinthians will claim that food is of no consequence ... but the issue is not really food. He warns them that insisting on their authority to eat these foods will result in the destruction of their weaker brothers and sisters.

The behavior of the elite becomes a stumbling block to the others. Believers who have the freedom to eat any food also have the responsibility to refrain from that food if exercising their freedom will ruin the belief of others.

Stumbling block or a stepping stone?



Mark 1:21-28

This is the first public deed of power in Jesus' ministry.

The story sets up the conflict between the power of evil and the power of God.

Remember the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Mark 1:12-13).

In this episode the authority of Jesus' teaching contrasts with that of the scribes.

Those present are amazed both by the authority of his teaching and over the unclean spirits.

The impact of his actions causes his reputation to grow throughout Galilee.

Within the account of the exorcism is a dialogue, initiated by the unclean spirits.

They call Jesus of Nazareth by name and appear to know his purpose.

This is an early instance of Mark's ironic reversals and surprises.

Evil forces have the most to lose in the coming of Jesus and the good news.

Understanding the threat that Jesus poses, the spirit exits the man with one final cry.

The possession by demons illustrates the reality of evil.

In this first skirmish, Jesus prevails but not without the unclean spirit protesting and acting out.

We have heard the voice of the prophet crying in the wilderness.

The voice from heaven speaking at the baptism.

Here the voice of the man (the unclean spirit) shouts and cries out the name of Jesus.

He does so not with admiration but with fear.

As the story in Mark proceeds the opposing forces will gather strength, will do more damage, and will seem to silence Jesus himself. Jesus commands the spirit to be silent with the same word as he commands the sea to be still in Mark 4:39. He rebukes the unclean spirit, the sea and even Peter (Mark 8:33).

Reflections that arise from this text:

The community that heard this gospel was powerless and poor.

In the ancient world they attributed illness to unclean spirits.

We face mental illness, addiction (vaping), sexual abuse (human trafficking) and racial hatred.

The gospel proclaims Jesus' authority over even the most unclean of spirits.