



“...if I hear the voice of the Lord my God
any more...”

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

January 29, 2006

A RESPONSIVE PRAYER

-- From *Prayers for the Christian Year* by William Barclay

Pastor:

O God, we thank you for all those in whose words and in whose writings your truth has come to us.

People:

**For the historians, the psalmists and the prophets, who wrote the Old Testament;
For those who wrote the Gospels and the Letters of the New Testament;**

Pastor:

For all who in every generation have taught and explained and expounded and preached the word of Scripture;

People: We thank you, O God.

Pastor:

Grant, O God, that no false teaching may ever have any power to deceive us or to seduce us from the truth.

People: Grant, O God, that we may never listen to any teaching which would encourage us to think sin less serious, vice more attractive, or virtue less important;

Pastor:

Grant, O God, that we may never listen to any teaching which would dethrone Jesus Christ from the topmost place; Grant, O God, that we may never listen to any teaching which for its own purposes perverts the truth.

People:

**O God, our Father, establish us immovably in the truth.
Give us minds which can see at once the difference between the true and the false;
Make us able to test everything, and to hold fast to that which is good;**

Pastor:

Give us such a love of truth, that no false thing may ever be able to lure us from it.

People:

**So grant that all our lives we may know, and love, and live the truth;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

When I was growing up on the outskirts of Raleigh, here was the sum total of our sources of information: we had WPTF news on the kitchen radio during breakfast, we got the *Raleigh Times* paper in our driveway in the afternoon, and at night we had three channels that came in on the “rabbit ears” antenna of our TV (ABC, CBS, and the public education station).

Not so anymore. Now we have several choices of newspapers, we have satellite radio, we have at least three-score channels of cable stations, not to mention millions of web sites on the internet. And we have pod-casting and instant messaging and “blackberry-ing.” We have thousands of new books published every year. And all of the above claim to be reliable, trustworthy sources of information. From the moment you get out of bed and switch on the morning news, to the time you put down the evening newspaper, you have been assailed by scores of different voices, all claiming to be fair and balanced, some even claiming to be prophets of truth. Which voices can really be trusted? Which prophets are authentic?

In this post-modern age, some simply shrug their shoulders at it all and say every claim to truth comes from its own relative point of view; therefore, all truth is relative. But among all the many voices, can we still dare to believe that we can pick out voices of truth, maybe even the voice of God? Are there people or even prophets through whom we can hear the voice of God today?

We stand on the edge of a new era when the voices that we had trusted and depended on are fading away, even in the church. For many Catholics and other Christians, that voice had come through John Paul II. Will the new pope come to earn that same kind of trust? Who knows? For many evangelicals and other Christians, that voice has come through Billy Graham, who has been one of the few mass evangelists able to keep away from money trouble and morality trouble. But now his voice is fading, too. Dan Shingleton and I used to trade sermons and stories of John Claypool, one of the greatest preachers of the twentieth century, but cancer stilled Claypool’s voice last year. The same is true for many other great voices of this past generation.

To whom shall we trust our ears now? To the likes of Pat Robertson -- someone who would blame Ariel Sharon’s stroke on Israel’s political policies? I don’t think so.

Other voices out there are even more extreme. Some people hear voices telling them to strap on belts of explosives and walk into the midst of their enemies and then detonate themselves. The prophets of holy war claim that God has reserved Paradise for such suicide bombers. And somewhere between the dangerous and the innocuous, there are also prophets of smiling optimism, prophets of self-actualization, prophets of wealth and health and Botox-injected happiness.

We live in the midst of a great transition, when the familiar voices we once counted on are fading away, and in their place is a bewildering cacophony of would-be prophets of truth, all seeking our undivided attention. It truly is new territory for us as we walk through this first decade of the twenty-first century.

It's a lot like the time the people of Israel stood on the edge of the new territory of the Promised Land in Canaan. For forty years they had wandered through the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan. Scripture says they could have made the journey in eleven days. But they had "issues," as we say -- issues of pride and sin and distrust of God. So they wandered until that first prideful generation -- who had made the escape from Pharaoh and then spent the rest of their time grumbling against God -- died off. Now their descendants, a new second generation of Israelites, stood on the edge of the Promised Land, making ready to cross the Jordan into the land of milk and honey. But they would go into the land missing one great voice, the voice of Moses. Their trusted prophet would not go with them. Why he could not is another story; suffice it to say that Moses and the Lord had some unfinished business.

That meant that the people of Israel would be without the voice of truth and the mouthpiece of God on whom they had been depending for a generation. And now they were about to step into a new land in which there would be all kinds of voices clamoring for their attention, claiming to speak the truth, claiming to be prophets for God. How would they deal with all the voices in this strange new land?

Moses, speaking for God one more time, made them a promise: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet." (Deut. 18:15) After all, Moses said, remember how I became your prophet? Remember when we were gathered around God's mountain at Sinai, and the mountain rocked with the voice of God, with smoke and fire and thunder and lightning, until you said, "If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more ... I will die"? Then God made me your prophet, and put God's words in my mouth for you.

And now when I am gone, God will raise up from among you another like me. Listen to him; God will hold you to account if you don't. But be careful. There will be other would-be prophets who will speak in the name of other gods. Don't listen to them. And there will be yet other prophets who will speak in my name but will speak words I have not given. Don't listen to them either. Now you might ask, "How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?" Simple: if the word doesn't take place, then it's not from the Lord. If the word doesn't prove true, then don't worry about it.

So Moses got his people ready to step into a strange new land of many voices, many of them false. But across the centuries there were also authentic prophets of God's truth: Joshua for starters, then Eli and Elisha and Elijah, then Amos and Hosea and Isaiah and Jeremiah, and then, centuries later, there was of course, Jesus.

I tell you this story because you and I are crossing into a new land like those Israelites did long ago, a land of many voices claiming to speak for God. In the midst of those voices, how can we know the voice of God? How can we recognize a word the Lord has spoken? Moses gave his people three clues that still work well today.

FIRST, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet LIKE ME.” (Deut. 18.15) An authentic prophet will be like Moses. The character of Moses is the pattern for the character of God’s true prophet. Perhaps the greatest trait of Moses’ character was how he was a person for others. Moses was not in his position to enrich himself or to glorify himself. When God told him that he could not go with his people into the Promised Land, Moses’ first concern was not himself but the welfare of his people: who will lead the people? When he died on Mount Nebo, there was no mention of any great estate accumulated by him

The true prophet does not use his position to enrich or glorify himself. That is a major red flag for many would-be prophets today. If you find yourself enamored with some religious personality, be wise like a serpent, and check him out. Is this prophet using his power to enrich himself, or to serve others? It’s not hard to find this out. Simply check out what he spends on himself. Does he live in luxury with a garage full of limousines? Does he like the high life and his own personal jet? Does he say things like, “God will only have the best, and therefore so must I?” Or does he pass on his wealth and success to serve the poor and the hungry and the spiritually lost? Then you will know just who is truly number one in his life. Then you’ll know whether that prophet is in the mold of Moses.

And the words of Moses are the pattern for the message of God’s true prophet. All the people of Israel had to do was to compare the words of new prophets to the words of Moses. If the new word was in harmony with the word from Moses, then this new prophet was from God. Today we have not only the words of Moses, but the words of those authentic prophets who followed him, especially the words of Jesus. That’s another reason to read the Bible regularly and carefully, so we can tell what modern voices match up with God’s Word or violate God’s word.

Here is a modern example, with the names omitted to ignore the guilty. In the late twentieth century there was a gaggle of prophets of prosperity. They claimed that if you supported their ministry, then you would enjoy wealth and health, a sort of divine kickback. But compare that to words of Jesus like, “Foxes have their holes and birds have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head,” or compare to “If anyone would follow me, let him take up his cross and die.” The prophecy of prosperity leaves out the call to discipleship! But an authentic prophet will match up with the words and the character Moses and Jesus.

On the edge of the Promised Land, Moses gave his people a SECOND CLUE to authentic prophecy: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me FROM AMONG YOUR OWN PEOPLE.” (Deut. 18.15) A true prophet is one of his own people. He or she does not stand apart from the people, but is part of their people. Chevis Horne was a young associate pastor in Martinsville, Virginia at the beginning of World War Two. He volunteered to be an army chaplain and went through some of the bloodiest battles of Europe, for he felt he could not miss the main experience of his

generation. After the war when he returned to Martinsville as a pastor, part of the prophetic authority he had earned was that he had been with his people.

A true prophet is also one of his own people in that he or she is not ashamed to be part of ordinary humanity. He does not pretend to be perfect or superhuman or without sin. And therefore his quest to follow the word of God and act ethically takes on all the more authority. An authentic prophet does not pretend as if he came from some exalted race. He or she is part of the human race.

On the edge of the Promised Land, Moses gave his people a THIRD CLUE to recognize a real prophet: “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.” (Deut. 18:22)

The first time you hear this, you might be tempted to sarcasm and say, “You know a prophecy’s true when it is true?! Well that’s a lot of help.”

The truth is, sometimes you don’t know right away whether a prophet is true or not. Sometimes you have to be careful and patient and give the prophet the test of time. Don’t be so easily swayed. Don’t jump on the bandwagon. Give your mind time to evaluate. Sometimes we don’t know the will of God for sure except in retrospect, until we look back at the path we took and see whether it was indeed God’s will.

In the meantime, pay attention to the other clues you already have:

- Is this prophet living as one of us or as someone high and mighty apart from us?
- Is this prophet in harmony with the words and the character of Moses and Jesus?
- Is this prophet making the will of God transparent to us in the plan meaning of Scripture and the life of Jesus? *(Rolf Jacobson, Lectionary Homiletics, December 2005 - January 2006, p. 73)*
- Is this prophet doing what authentic prophets from Moses to Jesus have done, that is:
 - paying attention to God’s world
 - then applying what we know of God to the world
 - then voicing what God is saying to the world?

Tomorrow, when you get out of bed and turn the news on, or when you get on-line, when you check your messages, when you hear all the voices coming at you on audio and video, in print and via satellite -- still your heart, and focus your mind, and listen carefully for the voice of God. It will sound like the voice of Moses and the voice of Jesus. It will guide you away from chaos and death. It will guide you toward abundant life.

-- Douglas E. Murray