

**Recognizing God's Word**  
 Epiphany IVB, January 28, 2024  
 St. Luke's Episcopal Church  
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How fortuitous that today is so near to January 25,  
 the date appointed for our celebration  
 of the Conversion of St. Paul.  
 The New Testament tale in Acts  
 about Paul's experiences surrounding his Damascus Road vision  
 are central to that celebration.  
Our gift is how readily this selection fits  
 with the thrust of the other lessons  
 appointed for Epiphany IV today:  
 Recognizing God's Word.

In Deuteronomy, the people hear what appears to be  
 a series of speeches that set up  
 the final basics of the administration of the Law  
 they are to obey as a people.  
 Today's lesson is a small selection  
 of the last words of Moses to the people  
 before they cross over the Jordan without him  
 to the Promised Land.

His words promise "a prophet"  
 who will be raised up by God from among them.  
 From our vantage point as Christians,  
 our first thought is that Moses speaks of Jesus himself.  
 We have to remember that  
 a bundle of Israelite prophets  
 preceded the coming of Jesus.  
 As readers of the Hebrew Scriptures,  
 we know that there are many prophets who are sent and  
 whom we read and hear of in the scriptures.  
 All are sent by God.  
 All remind us that  
 God is always with us and will never abandon us.

We may be troubled by what they have to say  
 when they chastise Israel (and us),  
 but always they are speaking  
 the words of NOT Jesus,  
 but all the prophets that come before him,  
 and many of whom remind us that  
 one who is more than a prophet  
 will be sent. Someday.

The people of Israel were  
 about as good at identifying prophets in their own time  
 as we are today.  
 How can we know if one who claims to be a prophet or  
 whom others call a prophet  
 is really sent by God?  
 What are the signs?  
 What are the words?

Even Deuteronomy is a bit fuzzy in helping us out.  
 In this chapter 18, verses 9-22,  
 we are told to see whether  
 what the prophet says comes true or not...  
 something we cannot  
 always live long enough to know!  
 And today, Moses says God will put  
 God's very words into the mouths of the prophet,  
 but still we aren't told HOW to know  
 whether the words are God's words.

When I was pondering  
 whether I was being called to be a priest,  
 my mentor said there are four characteristics involved to explore:  
 pastor, prophet, preacher, priest.  
 When many of us explore that prophetic aspect of priesthood,  
 we run up against our call  
 to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable...  
 definitely a characteristic of, say,  
 the ministry of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah afflicted so many in Jerusalem,  
 they had to keep him locked up for a while  
 in the last days before Babylon sacked Jerusalem.  
 Much of being a prophet  
 has to do with reminding people  
 of our promises made to God;  
 promises we often forget.

So where do we turn

to recognize a prophet;  
 to recognize one who speaks for God?

Back to the basics is always best:

the Ten Commandments show us the way.

As Christians, we know that Jesus simplified them even more.

Love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and  
 love our neighbors as ourselves.

If we hear God's love in the words

of the prophets and

others who claim to speak for God,

we can fairly say God IS speaking.

God even speaks

when the harshest prophets

are reminding the kingdoms of Israel and Judah that

they need to clean up their acts or

destruction will follow.

Even at the end

of the most challenging books of the prophets,

God says that reconciliation and return

are always characteristic

of loving and being loved by God.

When Paul, on a trip to persecute some more new Christians,

has his blinding vision on the Damascus Road,

Jesus told him that

even though Paul had been persecuting him,

Jesus was calling Saul, soon to be Paul,

to share his story and

turn people, especially the Gentiles

from darkness to light,  
 from Satan to God,  
 so that ALL could live lives in God's love.

So Paul said yes and  
 turned from persecution to evangelism;  
 from condemnation to love and welcome...  
 even to the Other, those Gentiles,  
 And - thanks be to God, US.

Paul was more evangelist than prophet,  
 but he had a commission from God,  
 just as the disciples of Jesus had,  
 just as the prophets had.  
 All were called to share God's word  
 with the world.  
 All did so  
 in spite of the danger.

In Mark's lesson, some wonder whether Jesus is prophet  
 when he is teaching authoritatively in the Capernaum synagogue.  
 The people present that day  
 recognized this teacher  
 as one who truly knew the meaning and depth  
 of the scriptures.

And then along came this man with the unclean spirit,  
 maybe several unclean spirits.  
 "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth..." he/they said.  
 "I know who you are, the Holy One of God."  
 Who names Jesus in this lesson?  
 The unclean spirit speaking for that man does so.  
 The people who heard Jesus teaching  
 are the great insiders in the synagogue  
 but they don't truly recognize Jesus's authority.  
 They are too busy wondering who he can be...  
 even AFTER the unclean spirit says  
 "I know who you are,  
 the Holy One of God."

As the Gospel closes,  
 it seems Jesus' fame is spreading,  
   not from being the Holy One of God,  
     but for being this mysterious someone  
       who does successful exorcisms and  
         is a really good teacher...  
           but who is he really?  
 He is the new "IT" person in Galilee  
   to whom people flock  
     to listen to without really recognizing him  
       as one sent by God.

THAT is the story of Mark's Gospel in a nutshell.  
 The people who should recognize Jesus, his insiders,  
   are really outsiders because they don't see who he really is.  
 Yet the social outcasts:  
   unclean spirits, Gentiles and outsiders  
     know right off just who he is.  
 Mark is all about who is outside and  
   who is inside;  
     about who recognizes Jesus and  
       who does not.

We hear and read the stories of the scriptures and think,  
 "Oh yes, I would know right off  
   just who Jesus is.  
     I would surely recognize God in Jesus."  
     But would we?

Roman Catholic author, Joseph Girzone,  
 wrote a great set of books about Joshua,  
   a modern day fellow who mystifies those whom he meets...  
     even as he duplicates acts  
       like those of Jesus himself and  
         speaks with ... well...  
 You might read the first book, *Joshua*, and  
   ponder what you would do  
     if you ran into a Joshua like that man.

In our present day,  
there are so many speaking about God and  
Christianity and what Christianity REALLY is or should be.  
By this time in our history,  
Christianity has spun off  
into so many denominations that  
it is hard to find the core truth  
in the midst of the human demands that  
have been placed upon  
these differing branches  
of a faith purporting to  
proclaim God's welcome and  
love for ALL nations.

During this week of Christian Unity,  
we can pray fervently together that  
God's love WILL prevail  
so that ALL Christians can remember the Holy One  
whom we worship and follow.  
Then, together, we can worship, follow and  
welcome the world  
in God's true, abundant and abiding love.  
Then we can truly say as one that  
we recognize Jesus in all we hear, do, and say...  
and affirm,  
"I KNOW who you are, the Holy One of God."  
AMEN