

Epiphany 4 / January 28, 2024

Deuteronomy 18:15

“The Lord your God will raise up a prophet like me...to Him you shall listen.”

Prophets speak the Lord’s words.

Have you thought about what you would say to your family as a last testament to your faith? What would your last words be? What effect would you like your words to have on their lives? Deuteronomy is Moses’ last word and testament to the children of Israel, the children of the people he led out of Egypt, forty years earlier. He urged them to serve the Lord alone and to love Him with their hearts, souls, minds and bodies. He recounted the deeds of salvation by which the Lord brought them out of Egypt. The faithlessness of their parents, who refused to trust Him to bring them into the land of promise. He reminded them of the Lord’s care during the forty years in the wilderness. The Lord fed them with bread from heaven and water from a rock. Moses reaffirmed the covenant the Lord made with their parents at Mount Sinai. He reminded them the Lord loved them, so that they would respond with love and faithfulness.

Moses would soon die. The Lord told him, he would not cross over to the land of promise. Moses was saying goodbye. In saying goodbye, he told them the Lord would raise up another prophet like him, a prophet greater than himself. Moses was a powerful leader. His power came from his especially close relationship with God. Moses spent forty days with God on Mount Sinai, receiving the commandments. Moses met God regularly in the Tent of Meeting. Moses had to cover his face with a veil when he came out. His face so brilliantly reflected the glory of God. Moses was a unique prophet, because of the familiar relationship he had with the Lord and the message he spoke. The Lord sent other prophets. The Lord would send a greater prophet, His Son Jesus. Moses and the prophets, faithfully spoke the Lord’s word and prepared Israel for the coming of Jesus. True prophets lead us to Jesus our Prophet, Priest, Saviour and King.

The prophets spoke the Lord’s word to encourage Israel in faith and faithfulness. The prophets spoke words of warning when the people were heading down a wrong path. They spoke a message of warning so the people would turn around and return to the Lord, escape the consequences of their sin and live. The Lord’s messengers were a pain in the minds of many of the people of Israel. When King Ahab encountered the prophet Elijah, he called him *“the troubler of Israel”* As if Ahab and his worship of false gods was not bringing trouble to Israel. As if Elijah was the problem for calling him to repent. Elijah was a pain to the king, because he told him and the people that if they didn’t turn from their idols and return to the Lord, they would bring more trouble upon themselves than they imagined possible. Prophets told the people of Israel that by turning away from the Lord in search of an easier, more pleasant and bountiful life, they were headed straight into the jaws of destruction. They called Israel to repent and return to the Lord, because with Him there is forgiveness and in Him is the fullness of life.

The prophets brought a little pain to the people by showing them their sins, so they would be spared greater pain in destruction, which happened totally to the Northern Tribes and partially, but just as painfully, to the Southern Tribe of Judah. The prophets confronted Israel with the terms of their relationship with God in the covenant. They confronted them with the message of repentance, so they would return to the Lord and receive the blessings of forgiveness and life through the knowledge of God their Saviour. The prophets continue to cause us pain with their call to repent. They show us our sin, so we see our need for Jesus our Saviour. The prophets call us to repent, so we will be blessed with forgiveness and have life through the knowledge of Christ our Saviour. The Lord’s prophets always lead us to Jesus our Saviour.

The Lord’s prophets cause pain by opening the wounds of our sins, so we would turn to Him for healing. We don’t like pain. Consider the myriad pain killers available for over-the-counter purchase. We do everything possible to avoid pain. Sometimes we cause ourselves more pain in the process. Consider the abuse of alcohol and drugs to drown sorrow and kill pain. Some pain has no purpose and should be killed, if possible, through medication. But pain can also tell us something is wrong, so we seek help and find healing. How we respond to pain can mean the difference between death and life. Pain alerts us to illness, disease and injury in our bodies. Pain tells us we need to seek help from a physician. Spiritual pain leads us to seek help and healing from the Great Physician.

Paul experienced pain, which he described as a thorn in his flesh. The pain was so intense, he went so far as to call it a messenger from Satan. But through the thorn that bit his flesh, he was drawn closer to God, who in Christ told him, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*” Prophets were a pain, because of their message. They suffered pain, because of their message. In human terms, a prophet’s reward was suffering and death. Prophets were strengthened by God in their pain, so they would call Israel to the Lord and make a people ready for the coming of Jesus, the Great Prophet and prepare us to receive Him as our Saviour.

The prophets brought spiritual pain to the people of Israel by diagnosing their sin as the source of their troubles and the true cause of their suffering. Isaiah told Israel, “*It is your sins that have separated you from your God.*” It is your sin that has brought trouble to your lives. Sin separates us from God and brings hurt and death to the world and our lives. The prophets show us our sin, so they may lead us to God our Saviour. The prophets pained Israel so they might dispense spiritual healing, by leading the people to God in repentance.

The prophets are a pain. They show us things we don’t want to see, think, know, or confess about selves; that we all sin daily in thought word and deed; that we are not masters of our destiny; and that much of life is beyond our ability to influence, let alone control. They show us that we need God at the centre of our lives. The prophets show us our need for help and salvation, so that in Jesus we would see and receive our Saviour. The prophets lead us to Jesus, the prophet greater than Moses. The One who heals our wounds, forgives our sins and gives life to all who believe.

Whether implicitly or explicitly, the prophets spoke about Jesus and prepared Israel for the coming of the great prophet, whom Moses said God would bring from their midst. Jesus came from Israel through His human birth by the virgin Mary. Jesus was greater than Moses through His eternal being as the Son of God. Jesus did everything Moses did for Israel, but in a greater way. Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea. Jesus walked on the water. Moses’ face reflected the glory of God. Jesus’ face on the mount of transfiguration, shone the glory of God from the nature of His being. Moses fed Israel forty years with bread from heaven. Jesus multiplied bread and fish to feed a multitude. Jesus offers Himself as the living bread from heaven that gives eternal life to all who receive Him. Moses died for his sin of dishonouring God in his anger. Jesus died for the sins of the world to make atonement for us before God. Moses body lies in an unknown grave. On the third day of His death, Jesus rose from the grave to show Himself our God and the Saviour of all who believe.

The people of Israel recognized Jesus as the great prophet whom Moses said would come after Him. After the feeding of the five thousand, the crowd perceived what Jesus had done and said, “*This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world.*” When Jesus was baptized the Father identified Him as His beloved Son with whom He is well pleased. When Jesus was transfigured, the Father identified Him as the great prophet to whom Israel should listen, saying “*This is my beloved Son, listen to Him.*” We listen to the prophets, because they lead us to Jesus. We listen to Jesus, because He has the words of eternal life. Prophets speak words of truth by showing us our sin, so we would see our need for the Saviour. Prophets speak words of truth by showing us the Saviour, so we would receive Him into our hearts, believe in His name, listen to His words and have life in Him in time and for eternity.

God bless us with ears to listen, hearts to believe and eyes of faith to see Jesus in His word, in His sacraments and through our fellowship with one another. In His Name. Amen