

THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church

Glory in Galilee: His Authority

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

¹⁵The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him. ¹⁶For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die."

¹⁷The LORD said to me: "What they say is good. ¹⁸I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. ¹⁹I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name. ²⁰But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death."

We saw it yet again in today's Holy Gospel. Not smoke and fire. Not hallows and angel choirs. But plenty of that hidden glory of Jesus, we've been looking for this Epiphany season. It filled the synagogue in Capernaum when the Prophet from Nazareth in Galilee spoke there. And the congregation sensed it too. For the Gospel's writer Mark notes, not once but twice, that the source of their amazement was not so much his exorcism of an evil spirit from one of their fellow members – although that did impress them (Mark 1:27). It was his command of the Scriptures and the demons that blew them away! Mark writes, "The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority" (1:22).

But I wonder how many – if any - of them grasped what was really so glorious about Jesus' authoritative display. That they were experiencing precisely what their forefathers had so desperately pleaded for: revelation from God proclaimed through a flesh and blood mediator that would not send them to death but win them to life.

It's what Moses was mentioning in today's First Lesson from Deuteronomy 18. "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him. For this is what you asked of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, 'Let us not hear the voice of the Lord our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die'" (Dt 18:15-16).

Moses is talking about when after Israel had been led out of Egypt and through the Red Sea and were brought to Sinai where God wanted to establish his covenant with them. How "Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, [as] the Lord descended on it in fire. [How] the smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace... [How] the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder ... and [then] the voice of God" (Exodus 19:18-19) spoke "from the fire" (Dt 5:24). There at the foot of Mt Sinai Israel pleaded with Moses that there might be another way for God to communicate with them rather than this way that made them melt in fear by the almost unveiled revelation of his awesome holiness. So convinced they were that they couldn't survive neither the sight nor the sound of such glory much longer.

And the Lord God Almighty agreed and gave them a flesh and blood mediator there at Sinai and for the remainder of the Exodus, promising to speak to them out of the mouth of Moses instead of out the raging fire of his majestic glory. But he also promised something more...someone more ...who would not speak his Word in a way that would make knees shake in terror but in a way that would melt hearts that would hear him in repentance and faith. Moses continued, "The Lord said to me: 'What they say is good. I will raise up from them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him'" (Dt 18:17).

Now suddenly, there he was in their synagogue: the long-awaited prophet from among the Israelites, the Word incarnate speaking as God himself on earth in these last days (see Hebrews 1:1-2). If only more of those gathered in Capernaum's synagogue that Sabbath day would have grasped why they were so struck by Jesus' authority. It was the same authority that made Sinai shake that, as requested, was now come down from heaven not to destroy them but to save them!

Do we grasp that? Do we, who are so used to Immanuel, to God being with us in “gentle Jesus meek and mild,” recognize the awesome authority drawn near to us in him? What the Israelites asked for at Sinai was good, God said, but do we turn it into a curse when we take it for granted, can take it or leave it, or grow bored with the humble, yet authoritative way God’s saving truth approaches us? To lose sight of how gloriously gracious it is that he draws near in the humble means of manger and cross, Word and Sacrament to save us sinners, rather than coming for us in clouds and smoke and fire designed to scare the hell into us is a dangerous and deadly serious thing. In the New Testament the writer to the Hebrews was thinking of just such situations when he warned, “Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy . . . How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?” (10:28,29).

Worse yet is when we have twisted the gracious way he answers our pleas to be shielded from his wrath into a license to ignore some of what he says and go our own way and do what we think is best, regardless of what his prophet says. “I myself,” the God of Sinai says, “will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name” (Dt 18:19).

Therefore, - Wouldn’t you agree? – we ought to hang on every single word of Jesus? Because his work of veiling his glory to live among us as our perfect brother in order to die for us as the atoning sacrifice for our sins is the only reason we are delivered from the dreaded wrath of a holy God and called instead in to a glorious fellowship of grace and peace with him. And the simple Word of his Gospel alone has the authority and power to save us.

Allow me a comment or two on that ominous last verse of the First Lesson. “But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death” (Dt 18:20). In the Old Testament and the covenant God established with Israel the penalty for preaching false doctrine was death. God was that serious about his Word that delivered his chosen people from slavery and death and brought them to the freedom of life eternal. In the New Testament there is no call to kill false prophets. But again, don’t mistake his mercy for something its not. God is still serious about his Word. So, he calls his people now to avoid – not read their blogs and books, watch their TV shows, or place your kids under their instruction - those who speak in his name but add to or omit or twist his Word in any way. “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause division and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them” (Romans 16:17). Jesus, the promised prophet greater than Moses who drove out the devil by the authority of his word alone speaks with the same authority when he tells you to dread the effect of their false doctrine: “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves” (Matthew 7:15). “Their teaching will spread like gangrene” (2 Timothy 2:17). “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough” (Galatians 5:9). Yes, God is still serious about his word because he’s serious about you.

So serious, that he’s kept his promise and has drawn near to you here and now in this place not in clouds and fire and billows of smoke, but in his Word, in the water of Baptism and the bread and wine of Communion, shared with you not by fiery angels of judgment but by those the Lord still raises up from among his people, flawed and fragile and imperfect as we might be, but called by him nonetheless to continue the authoritative ministry of the Prophet greater than Moses, our Lord Jesus Christ. May we never take the way he’s present here for granted. May we never treat it as something we can take or leave or be less than serious about. For the Lord Jesus Christ is here filling this place with his glory.

Amen.

Prayer of the Day

L: Almighty God, you sent your Son to proclaim your kingdom and to teach with authority. Open our hearts and minds to the message of your Holy Word this morning/evening, so that we would praise you with amazement for your love of us in your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C: [sung] **Amen.**

Prayers of the Church

For Epiphany, page 124

Special Prayers and intercessions: