

The Prophet and the Ways of God By Reverend Litton Logan

January 28, 2018

Scriptures:

Deuteronomy 18:9-22

⁹When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you must not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. ¹⁰No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, ¹¹or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. ¹²For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the LORD; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the LORD your God is driving them out before you. ¹³You must remain completely loyal to the LORD your God. ¹⁴Although these nations that you are about to dispossess do give heed to soothsayers and diviners, as for you, the LORD your God does not permit you to do so. ¹⁵The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." ¹⁷Then the LORD replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸I will raise up for them a prophet[□] like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. ¹⁹Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die." ²¹You may say to yourself, "How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?" ²²If 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.

SERMON:

Our text today comes from the Hebrew Scriptures in the book of "Debarim" (Words) and is rendered into English through the Greek as Deuteronomy, meaning "a repetition [that is a copy] of this law¹."

Like most of the books in the Hebrew scriptures and our Christian texts, Deuteronomy recalls stories about events, people, and teachings or instructions that have undergone editing, interpretation, and reinterpretation over time. Most scholars believe that the Book of Deuteronomy is a compilation of events and people that were given form and shape by an anonymous group of authors known as the Deuteronomists. It is thought that these authors and their school of thought found voice in the wake of the humiliations and sufferings inflicted by the Assyrians on the Israelites during the time of King Josiah and his reforms.

In Deuteronomy, we see clearly various religious instructions in support of the covenant between God and Israel that had been made at Mt. Horeb. Herein, the people are instructed not to have anything to do with the cultic practices associated with the gods and goddesses of their Canaanite neighbors or their earlier Egyptian overlords. Thus, the leaders of Israel would be instructed to destroy and purge all sanctuaries, cult objects, statues, and religious practices

¹ Jastrow, Morris Jr, S.R. Driver, Emil G. Hirsch, Benno Jacob. "Deuteronomy", Jewish Encyclopedia.com, Accessed, 1/23/18.

pertaining to other gods and goddesses. Israel was not even to make an image of their own god. God defined the festivals and religious activities appropriate to worship via Moses and the priesthood.

The book of Words replays speeches of Moses given shortly before his death while the people were on the side of the river Jordan opposite the Promised Land. Moses reiterates and summarizes the letter and the spirit of the laws that the people were to obey if they wanted to prosper once settled in the Promised Land. Moses starts this process by summarizing God's leadership during the people's exodus from Egypt and their wilderness wanderings, concluding with a call for the people not to forget God's laws, ordinances, and statutes as well as God's abiding presence that they had experienced since Mt. Horeb.

Interlaced with Moses' recapitulation of God's laws and abiding presence with the people, he also gives certain codes of moral and social behavior. These codes deal, in part, with criminal behavior through a loosely defined legal system and administration. Moses will also give rules governing family life, military commitments, and commercial dealings reflecting the moral and spiritual precepts of God. In addition, we find in Deuteronomy the balancing of the authority between judges, rulers, priests, and prophets also rather loosely defined. What we can say is that the power and authority of the rulers are severely restricted and subordinated to God's will and ways predicated upon Mosaic traditions.

In Chapter 18 verses 9-14, in support of the demand to honor, worship, and trust only in God, we read a list of prohibited activities. Many modern folks, Christians, Jews, and others, either smirk or recoil in disgust at these passages of scriptures and their prohibitions against child sacrifice, which was practiced by some ancients to ensure national prosperity, protection, or victory in war. People also roll their eyes at the divine prohibitions against sorcery, witchcraft, astrology, and augury. Yet, others see our scriptures this morning as just antiquated aspects of a primitive people and their religion.

However, our fascination with the occult and its implications are alive and well as the movies, TV, and print media indicate. I might add such things are attractive to modern people for many of the same reasons they were for the ancients, which I think may lay at the heart of why God forbid them and forbids them. (Remember, the uproar when we learned that Nancy Regan consulted an astrologer?)

Many people see dabbling in astrology, parapsychology, and the occult as just harmless distractions. Others see such things as having real meaning and power. For such believers, people can have access to mystical knowledge encoded in other dimensions of existence (Woo-woo Land). This mystical, encoded knowledge is not generally available to the average person without special help from certain enlightened ones, such as those who draw up horoscopes, etc. Such so-called information from beyond often is touted as containing heretofore unrevealed wisdom and knowledge of the cosmos, the lost knowledge of the ancients, or one's discernible destiny in the movements and alignments of the stars.

This preoccupation with the occult has given rise to an industry of fortune tellers, mediums, spiritualists, crystal channeling, etc., along with a wealth of anecdotal claims to its truths and power. We even have many Christians today, who in their quests to have self-aggrandizing and self-defining mystical experiences, have given rise to various permutations of ancient Pagan and Christian forms of Gnosticism under the heading of New Age religions or even Progressive Christianity. To such people and their messages, Moses in our scriptures this morning issues a clear and dire warning.

As our scriptures today indicate, there is nothing new about such things and what lies at the heart of such matters as I implied is as old as humankind itself. I believe our fascination with shamans, psychics, and the occult, just as our desire for a relationship with God, originates in the

anxiety, dread, and uncertainty that is common to the human condition. You see, we are finite and contingent creatures, who must struggle to survive and thrive against forces that we can't control and often work against us; however, we must choose to give our lives meaning, value, and to seek joy through our limited powers of reason and finite abilities to know. This is an awesome responsibility, and we are constantly looking for an edge, a leg up, a shortcut, some secret knowledge, etc. to aid us in living within the limits of our knowledge and the uncertainties of existence.

The tragedy of such thinking in my understandings, based upon scripture, lies in the fact that not even God foresees the future in specifics. Let me explain. Throughout scripture from Genesis 1 to the last amen in the book of Revelation, God is the all-powerful, all-present, and all-knowing Creator, but in that aspect of God that relates to the world, God does not appear to foresee people's personal and collective choices in any given moment. God does not see the actualities of people's choices until they happen. God foresees people's or a person's possible choices and knows the possible consequences of those choices and actions but does not see those consequences as some predestined reality. If God foresees and foreknows all our choices and is all powerful, then the idea of freedom of choice and self-determination is a cruel illusion. I quickly add that when people choose contrary to God's will and ways, with scripture as my witness, God holds open innumerable options and opportunities for redemption and rectification or otherwise the prophets, including Jesus as prophet and Christ, were unnecessary since everything is fated.

However, in seeking to acquire some super-ordinary insight or knowledge, to abate the anxieties of life and to experience control, comfort, and peace of mind, people will go to great, often stupid, lengths to avoid holding themselves under any authority other than that of their own design and making, even the authority and revealed will of the Creator and Sustainer. Thus, to the dabbler in the occult, I would say why would you want to make a religion or define one's relationship with uncertainty and contingency, when the Creator-Sustainer, as ever present life has revealed itself and its ways in the Christ, who has stood the test of time and human reason?

In today's scriptures, Moses tells the people that when they enter the Promised Land they are not to be involved in the religious practices of the indigenous people. God's people are to rely on their own history of God's trustworthiness and the revealed words of God through the trustworthy prophet Moses and the ones whom God will anoint and commission to come after him. In Moses' case, that will be Joshua. However, the understanding would have been that God would raise up prophets as necessary in the life of Israel.

Let us also remember that the people asked the prophet Moses to be a mediator between God and them, so they didn't have to stand before God and hear God's voice for fear of death. A real fear, because to come face-to-face with God and hear God's voice meant to die to whomever or whatever a person was in the moment before the encounter. This is because one becomes someone new - one becomes a person who has met God or heard God with its implication of totally new life imperatives, values, and insights.

Therefore, Moses tells the people that they are not to take part in the cults of their neighbors because such things are abhorrent to God and I might add still are. They are to rely on the word of God as revealed through a true prophet of God. How would they know that the prophet "speaks forth" God's truth? Simple. If what the prophet says proves to be true or falls within the parameters of past experiences of truth, then the people will know that the one who speaks is a prophet of God. If what the prophet says doesn't come true, then don't worry about them. In fact, you should run 'em out of town or kill 'em. Thus, the prophets' foresights and proclamations are not for some distant futures that lay beyond the testing life times of his or her audiences but rather to their more immediate and easily validating futures.

Now, as a side note, let me say that stamping out false prophets, witches, warlocks, and such became a horrible blight on Christianity from the 12th century until the late 17th century, even in this nation. Heresy, the beliefs and practices that run contrary to accepted church doctrine and teaching, were perceived to be the work of Satan and expanded to include various other religions, and so-called sorcerers, witches, warlocks, etc. In various Roman Catholic and Protestant purges of heretics, sorcerers, and witches/warlocks, it is estimated that several million people plus were tortured until they admitted heresy or satanic associations and then killed.

Around 1202, the papal legate Arnold, Abbot of Cîteaux, when asked how heretics will be distinguished from true believers reportedly said, "Kill all; God will know his own."² Like the redneck bumper sticker after 9-11, "Nuke'm all, let God sort'em out on the other side." History reveals that institutional imperatives for power, prosperity, and survival often preempt the essence of God's will, especially the Good News of God in Jesus the Christ.

Let me remind us that the Hebrew word for a prophet, "Nab'i", does not mean someone who foresees or seeks to foresee the future as such folks were condemned, but rather one called of God, who speaks forth God's call for people's faithfulness, while holding up the future consequences for good or ill of people's choices and actions.

Therefore, we should understand a prophet as one who is full of God's spirit and courageously speaks forth God's truth for his or her day. The prophet's insights may come in part from his or her own wisdom and experiences, from scripture, or sometimes from direct, divine inspiration.

However, let us never forget that across the annals of Judaism, God raised up numerous prophets, who have called and exhorted the people to faithfulness. In the minds of the writers of scriptures, when the people listened, they prospered, when they didn't they faltered and suffered the consequences of their actions - actions that we learn from scripture often either angered God or grieved God into action.

As Christians, we learn from the Hebrew Scriptures and from our Christian texts a clear and open message that God has been faithful in the divine promise to raise up prophets for each generation to guide and instruct God's people. Jesus, when seen as an anointed Jewish prophet, speaks forth the definitive insights and will of God along with the significances of understanding his ways of divine and human relationships. In the Christ, we find the latest and greatest understandings of how we are to be in relationship to God, one another, creation, and the unknowns of existence. We are to be in this world primarily by faith; that is our faith in God's love for us and our love of God. In this, we have all the power a human being needs to enjoy life and to trust all that is beyond our control to the One, who is ultimately in charge anyway. We are to live by faith in God and God's revealed will in the teachings and witness of Christ as it has been envisioned, interpreted, and reinterpreted under the influences of God's Spirit and to shun the abhorrent foolishness of the occult, be that so-called psychics, mediums, horoscopes, tarot readings, Ouija boards, black magic, white Magic, witches, warlocks, ancient or modern Christian Gnosticism, with its focus on various compendiums of secret knowledge that are available only to a select few in the cadres of the New Age.

An interesting point was made on this subject in a survey that I once read. I believe the survey was from the Barna Group a few years back. Now, please take note of what I am about to say: this survey stated that among the Christians surveyed, most of them spent more time reading their daily horoscope than their bible or time in formal prayer or spiritual meditation. And we wonder why things are so messed up and the church is waning in importance in people's lives. What science doesn't answer, occult foolishness and a godless humanism seem eager to provide.

² Smith, Homer W. *Man and His Gods*. Little, Brown, and Co., Boston, 1953. Page 257.

To this point, the governor of Kentucky, Matt Bevin, in response to the latest school shooting in his state called on Americans to "wake up," recognize that school shootings are a "cultural problem," and to look at the "root causes." "Our culture is crumbling from within," he said. Bevin [goes on to say] the desensitization to death and killing is coming at an "extraordinary price." "We can't celebrate death in video games, celebrate death in TV shows, celebrate death in movies, celebrate death in musical lyrics and remove any sense of morality and sense of higher authority and then expect that things like this are not going to happen." (by Amy Lieu, Fox News, accessed 01/27/18.)

As members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we have a long history of reading, studying, and discerning God's will for our lives as individuals and as a faith community. American Baptists, likewise, have a history of emphasis on rightly understanding scriptures and discerning God's will in time. However, I fear in our busy, modern lives we have come to rely too heavily on so-called prophetic experts in the sciences and have lost the ability or desire to quality control, validate, or invalidate them, and the information they pass out. Likewise, the case for prophets of religion. If what the prophets say doesn't fit what we want to hear or doesn't meet our need to distinguish ourselves in some weird or unusual way, we simply dismiss them and move on in search of someone else, who has a more pleasing "Word" that meets our needs and expectations.

Folks, through the power and the abiding presence of God's holy spirit, if you believe in such a thing, we are promised a source that will lead us into all truths and recall the teachings of the greatest person in the continuum of all God's prophets, Jesus the Christ. However, the assumption is that we have read his words, studied them, and sought to internalize them for our lives. God's will and ways, as Moses points out, must be told, heard, read, studied, and internalized for the Spirit to have access to them and give power to our lives. In other words, what we don't know, God's Holy Spirit can't use.

Bibliography

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