Sermon for January 28, 2024 “Speaking Words of Wisdom …”

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable, O God.

We are in the season of Epiphany – a time of light and revelation, a time to be startled into an “aha” moment, a time to be surprised by God.

But it seems that our world is in a time of darkness, of hopelessness. It is easy to despair: where is God in these terrible times?

We have a litany of world woes – Gaza, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan; Ecuador, and here in the US and Canada, political posturing and puffery drowns out rational discourse.

We didn’t come to church to get a run-down on where and how everything is going wrong and who is responsible. We came to church – well, why did we come to church? I’m not sure I can give you my own answer, let alone answer for you!

Perhaps we came to church to find some wisdom: some clear-cut path that will get us out of these miseries, that will put the world to rights.

Well, sorry, friends: that’s beyond my capabilities – and I believe beyond the capabilities of any worship leader, ordained or licensed or not, that stands behind this pulpit.

But maybe, just maybe, I can take a fresh dive into the scripture passages that the Lectionary recommends for today, the 4th Sunday after Epiphany, to glean some kernels of wisdom.

In the passage from the Old Testament, our First Testament, from the 18th chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses is communicating the words of God to a very scared bunch of wandering Hebrews

Today’s passage includes “If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.” So Moses is tasked with bringing God’s word to the people, to being the intermediary , the prophet. And, according to Moses, God will raise up a prophet like Moses and will put God’s “words in the mouth of the prophet who shall speak to them everything I command.”

Sounds OK so far. Nothing to be afraid of here: prophets will tell the Hebrews what God wants.

But, God is tough: “Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But 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.” No wonder the Hebrews were fearful of

God. This God that Moses was on about would kill them if they listened to the wrong prophet, a false prophet.

Now, that's perhaps not how we would want our God to act; but the consequences are clear, unmistakable.

Then again (verse 22 – beyond the lectionary reading) "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." So, that means it's only in retrospect we can know what was the truth, what was the true word of God and what was false.

So how do people know the difference between a "real" prophet and a "false" prophet; between the truth and misinformation? It's not really clear from these verses from Deuteronomy – I could not detect much logic, any clear wisdom.

So I dug a little deeper into the earlier chapters in Deuteronomy, looking for some clear clues as to what God wants for God's people, because surely that's what prophets are trying to tell God's people – then and now – and if we're to distinguish between true and false prophets, we'd better have a clear idea of what God wants.

Of course, there are the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy chapter 5): we know what they are and why they were important then – and now.

And in Deut Chapter 10 vs 12 (excuse the non-inclusive language): "So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, **13** and to keep the commandments of the LORD and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being."

And again in Chapter 13 verse 4: The LORD your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandments you shall keep, his voice you shall obey, him you shall serve, and to him you shall hold fast.

By combining these words of wisdom, we get a clear idea of what the God of the wandering Hebrews expected of God's people:

- Fear God,
- Love God,
- Serve God
- Keep God's commandments.

I think we have to deal with the word, "fear." We kind of skirt around the word and the reality of fear when talking about our relationship with God. We perhaps think that this is a term, a relationship with God, that belongs just in the Old or First Testament. This morning's Psalm ends with: "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom."

In recent decades, we Christians have changed “fear” into “awe” and I’m OK with that.

Could we say, “Being in awe of God is the beginning of wisdom.”

Through the centuries, the chosen people of God, our ancestors in the faith, have struggled and survived, they’ve had Kings and wars and expansions and exile and prophets, dozens of prophets – just look at the list of names in the First Testament: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel and Hosea. Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah. Micah and Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephania, Haggai, Zecharia, Malachi and … John the Baptist.

Wait a minute! That’s not a book in the First Testament! What’s going on here?!

I’ll tell you what’s going on: I think the words of wisdom of a long line of prophets that I just reeled off, starting with Moses (who met God) was not enough for humankind to know God.

You probably already know this; but the Gospel of Mark is the earliest account of the life of Jesus, being written in about year 70 of the common era. And Mark starts with: “As it is written in the prophets, Behold I send my messenger before thy face (this is the King James version), which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness. Prepare ye the way of the lord.” John the Baptist, preparing the way for Jesus.

The Gospel of Mark has no birth narrative. No annunciation, no angels, no star, no shepherds, no wise ones. Mark jumps almost directly, into the synagogue in Capernaum. There’s a regular service going on: the scribes knew their Torah, they knew their prophets, they taught and preached with all the accumulated words of wisdom of centuries of debate on the scriptures. In walks Jesus – is asked to preach. Now, unfortunately for us, Mark doesn’t record what Jesus preached that day; but Mark does tell us, a few verses earlier – and those of us who were at the church service at Gibson Memorial last Sunday, heard Rev Lisa Greenwood read them - that when Jesus came to Galilee, he was proclaiming (vs. 15), “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Mark tells us that, in the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus preaches with “authority” – not the authority and wisdom of the scribes but something new and different, new to those regular synagogue goers who were accustomed and presumable comfortable with the same old wisdom of the scribes. But, when Jesus preaches, they were “Astonished”. One can only imagine that the good folks in the Synagogue that day were wondering, “this man Jesus: is what he is saying for real?” “Is the Kingdom of God really at hand?”

There was one person there who knew exactly what Jesus was saying and who Jesus was.

That person was the man with the unclean spirit, possessed by a demon, the demoniac – “an unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice.” He spoke clearly enough, clearly enough for the story to have lasted until Mark wrote it down: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

We have to deal with this, this “demoniac”. Of course, for the last 100 years or so, theologians and preachers have made this story more palatable for our modern sensitivities and understandings. Not possession by the devil but mental illness, or schizophrenia, or Tourettes syndrome or drug addiction: psychological or neurological pathologies.

The Rev Debie Thomas, on the Website “Journey with Jesus” - Heather Donnelly often uses this website – Rev Thomas, suggests, and I quote: “that the “unclean spirit” ravaged the poor man whose body and mind it possessed: no voice of his own, no control over his body, no community, no dignity. All of us have suffered under the bondage of “spirits” that diminish, distort and wound us. All of us know what it’s like to lose agency, mobility, and dignity to forces too powerful for us to defeat on our own.”

However we explain away the demon, something made the demoniac defy conventional courtesy: he interrupted the service. He spoke directly to Jesus. He knew who Jesus was. He named Jesus as the one sent from God. “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” He knew the real prophet, not a false prophet.

Is this what it takes to encounter Jesus? An unexpected, unsettling, almost violent confrontation? Are the words of wisdom of the prophets - you remember: Fear God, Love God, Serve God, Keep God’s Commandments -are they not the way we can meet God? Is the preaching by the scribes in the synagogues and by ministers and priests down through the centuries – is it possible that that is not how and where we meet God-in-Jesus?

We don't know what Jesus said "with authority"; but we do know what he did: he spoke forcefully ("Rebuked") the man with the "unclean spirit"; and demanded: "Be quiet! Come out of him!" Scary, eh? Not gentle Jesus meek and mild. Whether or not we see the afflicted man as mad or suffering from mental illness or whatever, we certainly would not expect Jesus to speak to us like that!

If we were sitting in that synagogue I think you and I would be quite uncomfortable. The interruption of worship, the loud voices, the possibility of violence. Perhaps we assume that an encounter with God-in-Jesus only happens if we are good, quiet, polite, un-sullied, conventional, socially acceptable church-going folk. Quite shocking, isn't it?

God-in-Jesus has startled us again – first by coming as baby in a manger and now an angry young man with the gall to preach "with authority" beyond what the scribes were offering, and then performing a miracle by curing the man with an "unclean spirit.". The change to the man was radical, probably life-changing. And certainly the encounter got everyone's attention. Verse 28: "his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee". And from then and there to us, here and now.

We have to allow God-in-Jesus to surprise us. I think we have to recapture something of the "fear of God", the feeling of being in awe of God. We need to be alert to those moments, those epiphanies, when, even in these discouraging times, these times of greed and corruption, these days of wars and rumours of wars, of death and destruction, we are startled by the certainty that God is with us, that God-in-Jesus is right here, right now.

Jesus is the embodiment of God, the Word of God, the true Word of God.

Special music "Speaking words of Wisdom – Let it Be." Giving over our worries and fears to God. Pray. Listen.

"And when the broken-hearted people living in the world agree
There will be an answer, let it be." Amen

Libby Cassidy