**Deuteronomy 18:14-20** January 31, 2021

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Epiphany 4

*[The sermon reading will be read on the next page.]*

Dear Friends in Christ,

New chapters of life are often full of excitement and joy.

When you hold your first child in your hands, you have entered a new and wonderful chapter of life. When young husband and wife walk out the church door in the middle of a shower of rice (or whatever they throw these days), that is definitely a new and exciting chapter. On the first day on the job you were hoping to land, what opportunities open up!

Not all chapters are so joyful, but let’s think about these joyful and fun new chapters, because in Deuteronomy chapter 18 Israel is entering a new chapter of their life every bit as exciting.

New chapters are voyages into uncharted waters. Which means that however exciting the voyage, and deliciously tropical the weather, in every new chapter there comes a time when you need direction, wisdom from outside. You want guidance. When it comes to those times,

**Whom Are You Going to Listen To?**

It is really important for understanding our reading, and the entirety of this strangely named book of the Bible, Deuteronomy—you have to understand that Israel is right here entering a new chapter of its existence.

In this reading, the narrator is Moses, God’s first prophet to the Israelite nation. He speaks to them at the end of a forty year epic journey from their land of slavery to their promised land. As Moses speaks, the people are impatient, in a good way. They have one eye on him and one eye to the east. To the east they see the Jordan River and its fertile river valley. That’s the border of the promised land called Canaan. A couple miles past the river are hills rising to the green highland pastures of Canaan. They can’t wait to get there. They shift on their feet like thirsty horses at the smell of water. “Just cut us loose, Moses! Stop talking!”

But Moses can’t. Before they enter that new chapter, God through Moses, tells them what they need to know in that chapter of a new life. Almost the entire 30 or 40 pages of Deuteronomy is God’s desire for their new lives in that new land. It is the constitution and bylaws for Israel, spoken and then written down.

One of the things that would happen in that new land is that they would need God’s guidance. How would they get it? Where would they find answers? To whom should they listen?

*[Moses said to all Israel:] Deuteronomy 18:14“The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the Lord your God has not permitted you to do so. 15The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. 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 to me: “What they say is good. 18I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. 19If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account. 20But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death.”*

**I.** Well, when they got to the promised land, they would be confronted with the customs of the people who are already there. That is what verse 14 is about. ***“The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination.”*** That’s where those people went for spiritual guidance.

Now sorcery is a more specific word, and divination covers basically all forms of what we might call superstitious magic? As a sample, there is an ancient account of the king of a mighty nation called Lydia. Ancient Lydia was a few hundred miles to the north of Canaan, but this event gives you a general idea of what is meant by divination in the ancient Middle East.

When this king had really big questions, he would send messengers to a priestess at a place called Delphi. The priestess would give him mysterious answers in mysterious ways that sounded like wisdom from the gods. Well, at a certain time this king wanted to go to war against the Persian Empire which was threatening his borders. He wanted to know, by this priestess’ divination, if war would be wise. The priestess told the king’s messengers, “If you go to war, you will destroy a great empire.” Confident of victory, he attacked the Persians. But then *his* own army was defeated, *his* capital city captured, and *he* was taken prisoner. Then he realized his mistake. He did, in fact, destroy a great empire by going to war—his own! So the priestess was right! But then she would have been right no matter who won! (www.ancient.eu/croesus/) That gives an idea of what the people of Canaan were doing with their divination. Moses told Israel, ***“As for you, the Lord your God has not permitted you to do so.”***

In our day, the most direct parallel to those Canaanite ways are the psychics and tarot card readers; you know, the “900” numbers, or that place on 31W just across and up from the mall in E-town. People have questions, hoping for advice and a glimpse into the future. But God hates it when we look to anything in the supernatural other than him.

Now some people are going to say, “But when I went to a psychic, she told me exactly what was going to happen…” To God accuracy never was the issue. (Just because you get away with robbing a bank doesn’t make it right.) Whether the Canaanite diviners were right or wrong did not matter. God did not want Israel looking for guidance from any supernatural means except him. It’s about God being God in their lives.

**II.** That’s who Israel was *not* supposed to listen to. Then to whom?

Moses said, ***“The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But… the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.”***

God will determine when and whom he will send. His prophets will bring God’s messages to his people, rather than every person privately seeking out diviners and sorcerers. God’s prophets give broad brush commands, and consolations of permanent significance , rather than satisfying individuals’ momentary curiosity like a google search, or working their own angle like the latest stock market hack.

There is a totally different feel to the faith that the Lord wanted and that his prophets would proclaim, compared to the Canaanites religion and natural human superstitions are.

Now, since the Lord God would soon hand the land of Canaan on a silver platter to the Israelites, you would think it should be simple for Israel to stick with God’s plan. That’s not the way it worked out.

These Israelites had been out in the desert for four decades. Before that they had been slaves. They were neither wealthy nor well-educated. Comparatively, the Canaanites were. Israel marched into Canaan, and they were awestruck. Here was a technologically superior culture to their own. Canaanite cities had massive earthen work and stone walls, while the Israelites had tents. Canaanites had metalwork and abundant food from their agriculture, the Israelites were nomads. The Canaanite inhabitants apparently were just plain bigger and stronger (remember the Israelite spies who said they felt like grasshoppers around the Canaanites?) The religion of Canaan, too, had its appeal. They had stone temples and high places dotting the land, the pleasures sensuality combined with their religion, and it focused on material prosperity. The Israelite religion had only one sanctuary, and a moral code focused on loving their neighbor more than they loved themselves.

From a bystander’s perspective, the Israelites were inferior to the Canaanites in just about every way. Like a 19th century pioneer in a covered wagon looking at you in a car talking on a cellphone couldn’t help but feel a little inferior, so the Israelites with the Canaanites.

Add to that the fact that a fairly large number of Canaanites would survive the Israelite conquest. The Israelites would soon hear the scorn of those who looked down on them as backward sticks in the mud. Israelites would be sorely tempted to hold God’s revelation in contempt, to look at it as an obstacle to fun and success and advancement, to wonder how in the world they could ever get ahead following God’s will.

And so, near the banks of the Jordan River, even before landing a foot in the promised land, God through Moses said, ***“I will raise up for them a prophet… I will put my words in his mouth… You must listen to him.”*** With this passage, God tells Israel that he will make his will known through prophets. They are not to look for his will in the places the rest of the world does.

Moses was the first of those prophets. Other familiar names would follow: Samuel, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah. Some of them wrote parts of the Bible. Some of them are written about in the Bible. And there were the many more nameless ones who have not been preserved for posterity. They pointed people to the just and holy God who is rightly angered by human sins, but who also lovingly provides forgiveness for those sins.

**III.**  In the time before our Savior, that religion, that faith was wrapped up in pictures, symbols. God gave Israel the command to sacrifice lambs and sheep and goats and pigeons and bulls, to let them know that God would forgive their sins, not by their own works, but a dear price paid by another. Those sacrifices were pictures of Jesus, the Passover Lamb. In the Old Testament faith priests were mediators who stood between a holy God and sinful people. They were pictures of the Great High Priest, Jesus Christ, who would reconcile God and humanity for once and for all. The Old Testament kings were pictures of one who even at his birth would be acclaimed *“King of the Jews”* but who would clarify it all to say, *“My kingdom is not of this world.”* Even the way the Old Testament temple was set up was meant to be a sort of picture of God’s kingdom (Hebrews 9:1ff).

As Jesus accomplished the work symbolized by the sacrificial lambs and priests and kings, so also Jesus’ prophetic work completed the work of Old Testament prophets. And the Israelites expected it would be so.

When John the Baptist showed up, people asked him, “Are you the prophet?” When Jesus came along in our Gospel reading, they realized him as a great prophet, *“What is this? A new teaching—and with authority!”* Others guessed, *“Surely this is the Prophet”* (John 6:14). He spoke in ways and with an authority that prophets, even Moses himself, could not muster because he, Jesus, was The Prophet, the Son of God.

So while we read from the prophets regularly, we specially treasure the words of the Great Prophet. Like the prophets of old only better, Jesus’ word speaks comfort into our times of trouble: *“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”* He tells us that in uncertain times God still looks after us: *“Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”* He says that though we come up short in trying times, he will make it right: sins forgiven and failures turned to his purposes.

You may think that when a “new normal” comes along, we will need to reconsider the Gospel. Not so with Jesus our Great Prophet. *“You have heard it said… but I say to you…”* He gives directions that work even when all life’s signposts have been knocked down and are buried in the mud.

So we listen to God’s prophets, all of them in this sacred book. But most of all we listen to *the* great prophet, the one who spoke like none other. We confess with one of his followers who said, *“Lord, to whom [else] shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the holy one of God!”*

That is the one to whom we listen, in every chapter of life. Whether the chapter we are on is slow or boring, lonely or painful, new or exciting, he has the words of life. Amen.