

Dt 18:15 "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. ¹⁶ 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 18:17 "The LORD said to me: "What they say is good. ¹⁸ I 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. ¹⁹ If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account."

Dear Friends in Christ,

WHICH WAY, LORD?

There is an African proverb that says, "He who has a mouth is never lost." And some women are thinking, "True, if only my husband would use his mouth." Well I, too, sometimes must simply do what I don't want to do and ask. And just about always, as the proverb suggests, I find friendly and knowledgeable people who are very pleased to help. Suddenly I'm not lost any more. I don't know why it is so difficult for some of us to just ask directions, but it is.

I. Who will lead us?

The average adult Israelite of our text must have felt lost. For forty years Moses led the Israelites in the wilderness. In those 40 years, he had not only gone out in front of Israel and led, he also organized them, he was their chief justice, he publicly prayed for them and he was God's prophet.

The words I read a few moments ago are part of Moses' farewell speech to Israel. God had told him he would die. But don't think of Moses as a worn out shadow of his old self. He was not on his deathbed. The Good Book says that even at his advanced age "*his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone*" (Dt 36:7). And on the day of his death Moses walked up a mountain. "*There the Lord showed him the whole land... and Moses the servant of the LORD died there*" (Dt 36:). Thinking of the soon-to-be departure of their larger than life leader, surely Israelites were asking, "Which Way, Lord?"

In the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*—I don't know if people still watch that movie like they used to—in *It's a Wonderful Life* young George Bailey was staring death in the face—not his, but the possibility of someone else's. He didn't know what to do. Pondering the crisis he saw a printed advertisement in the window which said, "Just ask Dad!" And immediately his worry disappeared. He ran off to his father. A few years later in the movie, George's father died. In the movie you see clever young George Bailey shaken by the absence of his father as he realizes he must take up what his father had left.

Have you ever been there, when one you leaned on passed away? Somehow, even more than you realized, though you perhaps did not talk to them every day or week, having that trusted person around made life more secure. When everything got confusing and difficult you knew one person who could still make sense of it all and give you good advice. At their departure, life suddenly got a lot more insecure.

Which is the point of the reading. As Moses bid Israel farewell he assured them, "***The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers***" (15). The nation was about to lose a leader so great that he is one of the best known figures of ancient history. As they looked at losing this man who had brought them God's Word, God tells them, "Don't worry, I am going to send another prophet in his place."

Now sometimes people say that this verse is talking about Jesus, and it is. God said, "***I will raise***

up for them a prophet.” Jesus was the greatest of all prophets. Jesus was the Prophet in upper case letters all in bold. Jesus was not just a prophet, but *the* Prophet.

But we are not content to call him a prophet as most religions call their founders. If Jesus were no more than a prophet, we would be without hope. To understand this, let’s go to a footpath in the countryside, just after Jesus’ death. Two men were walking and talking about Jesus’ death. Then a third came up to them and asked, “What are you talking about?” “‘*About Jesus of Nazareth, they replied. ‘He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.’*” (Lk 24:19). Just like we heard about in our Gospel reading, right? When Jesus preached, “*the people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as their teachers*” (Mk 1:22). So these two guys on the path are saying, “Jesus was a prophet, a *powerful* prophet.” But they go on, “he was crucified, *but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.*” (Lk 24:21). Do you hear the disappointment? To them, Jesus was just a prophet. If Jesus were no more than another prophet, he is not what they or we need.

Just like Jesus’ miracles, his preaching pointed to something greater about Jesus than merely being a prophet. That greater thing is that Jesus is a bringer of God’s grace. He died, but not like Moses died. Jesus died to pay for our sins. He lives to pray for us in our times of troubles and temptations. He rules to send us spiritual leaders. He invites us to turn to him when we are weary and burdened. That is Jesus, the Great Prophet.

But for the Israelite on the banks of the Jordan The Prophet was a long way off. Deuteronomy was talking about life for ancient Israel. After two generations of nomadic desert herding, they would settle down in the land of milk and honey. Children would have different ways than their parents. Technologies would be new and strange. (If you are over 40 years of age, does this resemble your life?) No longer would they be a tight community living in a camp, but they would be spread out over the land of Israel. (If you are finally out on your own, does this sound like your life?) So many changes and uncertainties! Which way, Lord! God’s solemnly promises in this reading, “***I will raise up for them a prophet***” (Dt 18:18).

God has promised the same thing to us. With the coming of the New Testament church, God tells us, “*Christ gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service*” (Eph 4:11). God’s promise to these Israelites as they entered a new phase of their civilization is the same that he continues to give us in our day of unprecedented change: God will give guidance. Jesus Christ will raise up pastors and teachers and people within his church to lead his church.

II. How will they lead us?

A. With a Written Down Word

While I have just said that as God cared for Israel’s spiritual well-being, I must also say that part of what God promised does not apply to us. In verse 18 God added, “***I will put my words in his [the prophet’s] mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.***” You Christians extended a call to me to be a pastor on the 14th of September last year. Therefore I can say that I am part of God’s plan for spiritual guidance in this church. But I cannot claim what God just said. God said, “***I will put my words in his mouth.***” He isn’t talking about me teaching a Bible class or a sermon.

God’s prophets spoke directly from God. And then prophecy ceased. Yet while that prophecy stopped, what those prophets said is written down. It is what we call the Bible.

In so-called conservative Christianity, which includes the WELS and some other churches, we take God’s Word as the only source and measure of all faith and life. (Notice this “conservative” is a religious term, not a political one.) Whatever I say in a sermon, it is only valid as far as it agrees with God’s Word. We believe that God’s Word speaks to people of all times and circumstances. When we need guidance, this is the first place we go. When we have a question about communion or charity or abortion or marriage or anything else, we go to the Bible and ask it.

B. With Objective Truth

This is a solution that draws a sharp line between us and other people. One older post-graduate student recently summed up his observations this way. “In a way, it is easier being a Christian now than a couple decades ago. Before, many students were more actively anti-Christian. But these days, most students will say, ‘If that is what you believe, that’s okay. Doesn’t work for me, but if it works for you, great. So it is easier to be a Christian, but harder to reach out to others.’”

With that spirit of toleration and our information technologies, more so than any time in history we have the freedom to do whatever we want. We revel in that freedom of no one telling us what to do. But God’s will for the Christian Church was never that. At the lowest point of the spiritual life of Israel, the Bible laments, “*In those days... everyone did as he saw fit*” (Judges 21:25). Which is exactly the spirit of our age.

God does not give approval to the spirit of this age, the age of toleration. God was never content to let his word stand on the same ground as human reason. By giving revelation to prophets and having that revelation written down, God is saying that we cannot appeal to what we feel in our own hearts. He says that we must return to what he has taught us in his word.

When we ask the question, “Which way, Lord?” we need to listen to the Lord. Before we try to reason out what sounds good to us, we need to open our Bibles. Perhaps the best advice on that is found in Acts 17:11, “*Now [the people of the city of Berea] were of more noble character... for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true*” (Ac 17:11). God is pleased when we test the messages of this world, even our pastors, against his Word.

At any time in life where we ask that question, “Which way, Lord?” There is one person we can always ask. He will give us direction. His advice will not change from day to day. And that is God in his word. Take it up. Learn to study it daily. Stop wandering down the road not sure where you are going. Look at God’s Word. Or do you enjoy wasting your time, money and energy on being lost in this world? Amen.