

Epiphany 4  
February 1, 2009  
The Rev. Canon David W. Lovelace

Today's reading from Deuteronomy contains God's promise to send a prophet like Moses who will speak with authority. Recall that for forty years while the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness, they relied on Moses as their guide and link to God. Moses knows he is about to die and the people are now on the brink of entrance into the Promised Land wanting to know when they would enjoy prosperity again. Moses reminded the people of their past and how their reliance on false gods had failed them. He warns them not to be led astray by soothsayers, mediums or oracles. Instead he tells them God will give them a real prophet. "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among my own people, I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command."

Because he was a prophet, Moses anticipated the thought of the people. How do you know if a prophet is true or false? They would not know, he admitted, except in retrospect. "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."

That is a sobering thought. We like to think that we know the mind of God; we can discern God's will. We like to think we can recognize God's messenger by the content of the message, but apparently not so. All too often we judge the world through our own fears and desires. Hindsight is always better than foresight, This means we have to be willing to experience God in the process as life plays itself out in our world.

You and I live among prognosticators and market forecasters as we now wander through our own financial wilderness. Many of us took out huge mortgages in the days when house values continued to increase on an almost daily basis. Now we are trying to make sense of this strange new reality we find ourselves facing as the financial market has become unstable. Honestly, we want to know how this is all going to work out. "God only knows" is not just a catch phrase any more, early indicators of a new world seem to lie ahead.

Which brings us to the Gospel this morning; it is the Sabbath day in the city of Capernaum. The whole community is gathered for worship. Everything is

familiar to everyone because worship is what you do on the Sabbath. On this Sabbath a new teacher gets up, a man from Nazareth. As he began to teach a stir began to spread through the crowd. What he was saying to them was definitely not what they were accustomed to hearing. He was shaking things up. Instead of quoting from the accepted authorities he spoke with personal power declaring God's reign is now.

Things really began to be shaken up when a man with an unclean spirit got up and challenged Jesus. The poor man never had a chance as Jesus commanded the spirit to be silent and leave the man. The whole congregation was amazed and shaken by this event. "Who is this man? What is this a new authority? What is going on here?"

That is how the Gospel writer Mark introduces us to Jesus' ministry. This story sets the stage for the impact Jesus will have and continues to have now in our world. What shook people up was the way Jesus spoke with authority and acted with an authority that demanded people's attention. He does not speak as if he is the nightly news commentator. He is not just offering his personal opinion on the state of the world. Jesus represents God's claim on our lives and on our world.

The unclean spirit recognized this, "Have you come to destroy us? We know who you are the Holy One of God."

The spirit is speaking from the belief in the ancient world that if you know someone's true identity, you can use it to gain power over them. Mark presents this confrontation as a showdown from the very outset of his ministry between Jesus and the forces of evil at work in the world. Jesus was not to be overpowered because he came with the power and authority of God.

I believe that Jesus is still shaking things up today. Jesus' words reach us with God's authority and clearly place God's claim on each and every one of our lives. Jesus calls us to see that our lives are important, that we each have a calling and that calling is part of the larger calling of God's people to transform the world. God has a role for each one of us to play in the well being of creation and of God's people throughout the world. We are at our best when we follow Jesus' way when we love God with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourselves. We are true to that which God desires when we live with compassion, extend forgiveness and are truly generous. We are

called to live not just for ourselves but to be as responsive to our neighbor in need as Jesus was himself. Jesus calls us to follow him, not to be possessed as was the man with the spirit in this story but to choose to be a follower. God has granted us the freedom to give ourselves to God's purposes or to fritter our lives away on lesser things.

There is among us, I believe, something like the unclean spirit. It is present in our culture and continues to exert its influence on our lives. It expresses itself in attitudes and behaviors, though the media and in the popular culture. It sells us on the idea that this life is all we have so we must live it with gusto by claiming all we can for ourselves. It tells us it is okay to want more and that bigger is better.

The spirit teaches us to value people by what they have and not by who they are. The spirit urges us to continue to have more than our neighbor and measure ourselves by our possessions. Our humanity depends on being delivered from this spirit.

Just like the man in the synagogue long ago we need Jesus to enact God's transforming and renewing work in our lives. We need to be reminded that it is who we are that is important and not what we have. That at the end of the day, we'll be remembered for how we live our lives and not for what we have. For those called to follow Jesus and take up his work in this world that fact is good news. Our own work matters, the ministries to which we are each called count. What we do in the name of Jesus is life changing. Our prayers participate in the mystery of the living ministry of Jesus on which our lives are centered.

Scott Peck writes: "If one ever has the good fortune to meet a living saint, one will have then met someone absolutely unique. Though their visions may be remarkably similar, the personhood of saints is remarkably different. This is because they have become utterly themselves. God creates each soul differently, so that when all the mud is cleared away, His light will shine through in a beautiful, colorful, new pattern." We may not all be saints but even our stumbling attempts can convey God's love. The only way to fail as a follower of Jesus is to not try.

Be the unique saint God calls you to be. Love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself. Live with compassion, forgiveness and generosity. Be part of God's plan to transform the world and to make all

lives whole. Understand that your calling in ministry is as important and sacred as the calling of those of us who wear our collars backwards. Pray that God will work in you and through you to make God's world a better place for all of us. I challenge you today not to be silent but to claim your rightful place as a minister of God's love. It's time to shake things up again.