

Epiphany 4B
Peace, Seattle
February 1, 2015
Deut. 18:15-20, Mark 1:21-28

BEAST MODE

The season's nearly over, and he knows it'll be his last. It's been one long ride; full of ups and downs, close calls, shifting strategies. The set backs—and there were many—were tough; the wins, powerful but fleeting. But through it all he did what he was asked to do—he left it all on the field.

And what everyone wants to know is, what's next? Who is going to carry the ball when he's gone?

So as he steps to the podium for the last time, he wants to leave them with a sense of hope; with something they can hold on to as the next phase of the journey unfolds.

His name? Moses. **The place?** The wilderness. **The audience?** God's chosen people.

Poised on the edge of a promised future long in coming they wonder what'll happen when Moses—their coach, their guardian, their compass—is no longer there to guide them.

Who's going to carry the ball then? The answer Moses gives them is simple:

THE LORD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM AMONG YOU;
AND YOU SHALL HEED SUCH A PROPHET.

God, you see, always has a game plan!

But how will we know whether one who CLAIMS to be a prophet of God actually IS a prophet? Five keys this morning, gathered from the prophetic tradition, about how to recognize a true prophet:¹

(1) **True prophets don't seek the job, the job seeks them.**

Moses tried to argue his way out of God's call; "I'm no good with words," he said.

Jeremiah tried to beg off, "Look—I'm only a kid!" Elijah hid in a cave. Jonah ran away as fast as his legs could carry him. No prophet in the Bible longed to be a prophet.

They didn't enlist, they didn't volunteer; they were drafted.

If you've ever been compelled into a role not of your own choosing; if you've ever had to put aside personal plans or dreams to fulfill a higher call, then you have an inkling of what that's about.

(2) **True prophets seek neither self-promotion nor riches; and endure much worse.**

Elisha heals Naaman of leprosy but won't take a dime for it. Elijah spends most of his prophetic ministry on the lam. Many of the prophets put their pride and dignity to the side in order to get God's message across—even if it means engaging in bizarre acts like marrying a prostitute or walking naked in the streets or lying down on the ground for weeks on end.

Not the best strategies for winning friends and influencing people.

¹ I'm indebted to Kathryn Schifferdecker, associate professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, for these insights, found @ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2353

A few weeks ago we went to see the film [SELMA](#), which follows Martin Luther King and leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference into the fray at Selma, Alabama, during the campaign for voting rights in 1965. It's a powerful film, an outstanding film.

One of its gifts is that it brings you behind the scenes and allows you to see more clearly the personal struggles the King family endured. Being assaulted, reviled, spit upon; having your lives threatened; suffering constant humiliation—it all takes a toll. And true prophets pay the price.

(3) True prophets speak God's word, not their own opinion.

THUS SAYS THE LORD is their refrain, and the words that follow are almost always uncomfortable, to say the least. Comfort and hope may figure into the mix—but almost always on the other side of judgment.

God's prophets don't tell us what we want to hear; they speak truth to power whether that truth hurts their own interests or not, because it's not about them.

(4) True prophets bear a “family resemblance” to what has come before. (repeat)

Though historical contexts change—and change dramatically—still there's a sense of continuity in the message from one generation to the next.

TURN BACK, O PEOPLE! REMEMBER THE COVENANT!
BE THE COMMUNITY GOD'S CALLED YOU TO BE!
CONNECT THE DOTS BETWEEN LITURGY AND LOVE.
SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT.

The echoes reverberate from ages past and even down to our own day.

If a prophet's words contradict what we have come to know about God's unfolding story, then those words—and the prophet him/herself—should be, for us, a bit suspect.

And finally...

(5) Prophets—whether true ones or false ones—are known by their fruit.

This is the central point of Moses' message to the people today.

How can you tell if a prophet's words are true? You look at what those words produce.

Does their preaching lead to repentance or to complacency? Transformation or self-absorption? Sometimes it takes a while to know.

Eight years ago the prophets of Wall Street said there was no limit on profit. The housing market had no ceiling. Speculative financing presented no problem. Then came the bust.

“Beware of false prophets,” Jesus will warn, “they come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.” (Mt. 7:15-16).

Five keys for recognizing a true prophet.

Now all this teaching, all this deep tradition traced all the way back to Moses serves as the BACKDROP, you see, when we arrive at our gospel, where Jesus, fresh from recruiting new disciples, heads to the synagogue on the Sabbath, and starts to teach.

And the people are astounded because he speaks with a vitality and authority that they haven't experienced in generations—since before their tradition lost its power to transform.

What happens when institutional religion becomes an accepted and acceptable part of the social and cultural fabric? It loses its ability to call people to account; to utter something new. It becomes domesticated.

What happens when faith goes soft? It makes bargains with the powers. It accepts the boundaries imposed upon it: **YOU CHURCH FOLK GO AHEAD AND STAY THERE IN YOUR BUILDING, WE'VE GOT NO PROBLEM WITH THAT. WE'LL LET YOU KNOW IF YOU CAN COME OUT—AND WHEN.**

“The Prince of Darkness,” writes Walter Brueggemann, “tries frantically to keep the world closed so that we can be administered. The Prince has such powerful allies in this age.”²

But then Jesus steps into the room. His voice lifts God’s Word out of the dustbin, and the air starts to vibrate, and jaws start to drop. **SO THIS IS WHAT A PROPHET SOUNDS LIKE!**

And right on cue, in slinks the Prince of Darkness, looking for his place in the pew.

And that is when Jesus goes into his version of **BEAST MODE**.

No, he doesn’t stiff-arm his opponent, run over him, or hurl him out of bounds. He simply dispatches him with a word: **MUZZLE YOURSELF!** And before you can say “touchdown” the demon is gone.

Something new has been uttered in this place. Something more truthful and powerful than the folk here had any reason to expect.

The reign of God has come near, and the world has been set loose toward healing.³

This is what Jesus is about, you know!

- Opening what has long been closed;
- Freeing us from all that would bind us;
- Unshackling us from habits that keep us curved in on ourselves and prevent us from following.
- Taking the fight to every power that stakes a claim on God’s people and God’s good creation.

Jesus makes WILD again whatever has become domesticated.

And when we come to his Table, when we eat and drink him, that RE-WILDING begins in us.

The seed is planted. The fruit awaits.

Amen.

² Walter Brueggemann *Finally Comes the Poet*.

³ *Ibid.*