

Do we still have prophets? I don't mean secular prophets who tend to spend more time denouncing than proclaiming. I mean real prophets; prophets out of the Hebrew Testament model. The prophet, by definition, is "one who speaks for another." The prophet's identity comes simply and entirely from speaking God's word.

In Scripture we know when to sit up and take notice when the prophet speaks, because he typically starts out with, "Yahweh says this . . ."

This is a claim that the prophet is called by God and is speaking in God's name. It's always been hard to tell the difference between true prophets and false prophets. What does a true prophet look like?

First, in the Hebrew Testament, prophets were described as having been raised up by God. Prophetic books often begin with a story of calling, "The word of the LORD came to me saying . . ." or "the word of the LORD came to the priest Ezekiel . . ." or the recounting of a vision or an oracle, "The vision of Obadiah. Thus says the LORD God . . ." and "The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw . . ."

Second, a prophet will be a part of the community, called forth from among the people, not an outsider. Third, the Lord will put the words in the mouth of the prophet. It will be God's message, not the message of the prophet. And finally, if anyone fails to listen to the message from the prophet, or if someone speaks in the names of any other gods or takes it upon himself to prophesy, that person will be punished by God's hand.

There are some clues for discerning true from false prophets. A prophet is steeped in the religious tradition. This is why Moses says that "one like him" will be called forth. That person will be faithful to the tenets and requirements of the Law and will also rely on God for direction. That person will have, as his primary concern, the well-being of the entire community, even when the community is disobedient and stubborn.

Prophets, contrary to some beliefs, don't see into the future. They see intensely into the present in a way that could change the future, if the people would listen to what they are proclaiming and apply those divine principles

That's a lot to put on the shoulders of the prophets!

Today we're not comfortable with prophets, and in that way, we're much like our Jewish ancestors, because most often they not only didn't listen to the prophets, who challenged their complacency or pointed out the error of their ways; they often abused, ostracized, and even killed them for doing what prophets do: speak on behalf of God. And here's the irony, here's the reason why Moses, in the first reading, is easing the fears of the people in the shadow of his pending death: it was the people who asked for prophets!

They relied on Moses to be the intermediary, to speak one-on-one with God, and then come back and relay God's will. Because they did not want a personal encounter with God. A personal encounter with God was a fearful experience, and they had

experienced God during the Exodus. They were pretty content to let Moses meet with God. Which leads us to the Catch-22 when it comes to prophets, to Moses. They didn't always listen to the oracles or prophesies.

Are there still prophets?

Prophets were around about as long as Israel had kings and a kingdom, just under 500 years. And when prophets stopped appearing, the people wondered how they would hear God's word and know God's will. This is where scribes come into the picture. Scribes were men who were schooled in the Law and the Prophets. Scribes didn't get their calling from God, like the prophets. They were interpreters of what had been written down and they applied the writings of the past to their contemporary situations. So, they were always quoting particular passages. They didn't bring anything "new" from the mouth of God.

Then Jesus appears among them. Today's passage is early in Mark's Gospel. Jesus is beginning his public ministry, and he takes advantage of his right to expound on the scriptures in the synagogue. The people are amazed, and it seems a bit uncomfortable based on their responses. They wonder if Jesus is the prophet of which Moses spoke many years before. There was something about him that captivated them and yet made them question. Jesus was not like the scribes. He didn't quote scripture like they did. He spoke, as we interpret today, from his personal relationship with the Father, and he proclaimed the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. Phrases like, "Amen, I say to you . . ." and "Let those who have ears to hear, listen."

Today we hear from Mark about Jesus' first miracle. He drives out demons, evil spirits, from a man in the synagogue.

We don't have the same beliefs in spirits and demons as people in Jesus' time. They believed that spirits were more powerful than humans but less powerful than God. They believed that all the ills of their day, illnesses, deficiencies, the personal problems some encountered, all the suffering in the world, were the work of demons, spirits with bad intentions. They saw the world as the battlefield in the deadly conflict between forces of evil and forces of good. The wisdom of the authorities was to avoid people possessed by demons because they were unclean, and they were contagious.

So, a man possessed by demons in the synagogue was no little thing. Everyone there risked becoming unclean. When confronted by one of the demons, Jesus does the opposite of what was expected. He crosses the boundaries of the purity code of his day. The boundary of clean and unclean created division, which led to exclusion. He doesn't walk away, he engages the demon, who is trying to exert control over Jesus by calling him by name. The demons know that Jesus is more than human, that he is also of the spirit-world. And as a further example of his authority, his divinity, he commands the demons to silence: paraphrasing, "Would you shut up and take a hike!" You get the idea. In a society filled with divisions, Jesus demonstrates that the path of love is to cross boundaries.

The demons do not want to leave so there's a struggle inside the man, a physical manifestation of the demons trying to hang on in the face of someone who is more powerful. They've just called him out as the Son of God. Jesus prevails. The evil spirits depart, which strengthens the perception among the people of Jesus' authority. He's more than just a scribe; he's even more than a prophet. What's going on here? Who is this guy? Even the unclean spirits obey him.

So, do we still have prophets today?

We certainly still have demons. We have habits that we should break. Sometimes we've even arranged a truce with the forces of evil, for our own convenience. We all have our various modern-day addictions. We all, in some way, suffer the complacency of not acting in the face of poverty, homelessness, injustice, bias – racial, gender, and religious. We all experience, in some form, our own measure of dishonesty and bias, or an unwillingness to forgive. In some measure, we suffer from a favoritism or preference toward our own agendas and personal causes. We can be possessed by unclean spirits and not even know they take up residence, because they hide behind polite masks. Prophetic voices call out to us to recognize our demons. We're being called to question our motives and interests.

But we're not asked to change our ways all at once. As Christians, as self-identified disciples of Jesus, we need to be reminded of our responsibilities that require us to resolve to improve our lives. This is how we will win the battle against the forces of evil. This is how the Kingdom of God is established – little by little.

In the words from the Dogmatic Constitution on Church, All disciples are equally called to holiness and all are given the mission to "make manifest in our ordinary work the love with which God has loved the world."

Do we still have prophets today?

I believe we do.

We just have to tune up our listening and get over ourselves.