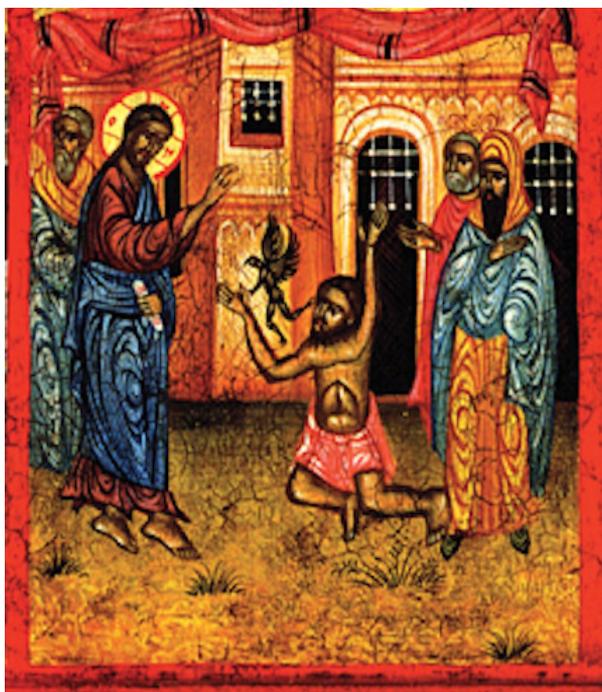


ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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THE VERY WORD OF GOD

The Rev. Andrew F. Kline

Text of a Sermón preached on the 4th Sunday after Epiphany

January 31, 2021

DEUTERONOMY 18:1-5,10 | PSALM 111
I CORINTHIANS 8:29-31 | MARK 1:21-28

We need a word from the Lord. But where will we go to find it?

If we want the purest, the clearest, the most refreshing drink of water, we would be well advised to go to the source. We pick up a book and we look to the author. The author not only is the source of the work. The author is the authority for everything in it, even in a certain sense, what we read into it, what the work becomes for us.

And so God is the source, the Author of our lives. The only problem it seems is that we are born into a world that immediately hurls us downstream miles and miles away from the source, a world that seems determined to hide that source from us.

Yet, we Jews and Christians live with the unfailing faith that God has given us his word. The pages of Scripture describe a gradual unfolding of this word. First in creation, then in the gift of the Way, the Torah given to Moses, then in the promise that Moses would be succeeded by a prophet.

The language of our first reading is broad. Moses could be both speaking about prophets in general or a single prophet to come. Clearly, Moses is establishing the office of the prophet, a mechanism, that would become an institution, as something we cannot do without. Moses is saying: "I get it. When we were all there at Mt. Sinai, and the thunder and lightening was too much, you deserved better. You will get more practice. God will raise up prophets who will point to a word that will stand forever."

Moses adds, your best guide will be to study me, understand how I have managed to do this job. First and foremost, the teachers and prophets who speak to us will have to take on the mantle of leadership, but not just any type of leadership, but the servant leadership that has marked my life, from the moment I was called from the holy ground before the burning bush. In fact, look for prophets, even a special prophet, like me.

Look for a prophet marked first of all by humility, and second of all by his desire to go to that source, to stand in the presence of that fire. Look for a prophet who never turns back, who never gives up. Finally, look for a prophet who is a person of prayer, of spiritual power. Look for a prophet who reasons with God, argues with God, wrestles with God, so that God is always reminded of his merciful character and the people are fed.

In our gospel lesson this morning we look to what Jesus did first, his very first move, coming out of the wilderness into a holy place. If the best place to find a devil is in church, so we might find confidence or salesmanship in place of truth.

Mark opens story of Jesus' ministry with this simple observation: he taught them as one having authority. So much so, he left them speechless. Those who listened to Jesus were put in touch with something more radical, something from the source, something that was able to reveal what was going on under the surface. The first to recognize Jesus are the powers, the beings, from the spirit world.

The language is striking, marking off the boundary of an invisible world. The unclean is sitting among the clean. The demon cannot hide any longer, nor keep quiet. The spirit reacts in grandiose terms, offended to be found out, speaking in the royal we, announcing that he must go because he cannot exist in the presence of the Holy. The demon does not name Jesus, but names the place, the forcefield, he inhabits, holiness itself.

We do not have to go far to understand this ancient encounter with a purely spiritual force. Even to our jaded modern eyes, we see it best when we look in the mirror, and try to tell ourselves the truth about ourselves, when we face our lack of power over our own pridefulness and attachments.

What other force in modern life, but our addictions, first comes from the outside, possessing our bodies so completely, then takes us over from the inside, becoming a prison that can only be escaped by freeing our minds, by a one step act of faith or a 12 step practice of identifying what is holy?

Jesus has come to bring holiness within and without. He has come to shed light on any darkness, cast it out, and silence the confusion that inevitably takes root in cultures of deception and lying.

There has been some incredible reporting in recent weeks about what happens to the soul of individuals and nations when they give themselves over to fantasies and lies. One reporter in the New Times has followed the adherents of QAnon for five years. He recorded them live at the very moment their prophecy failed, when Joseph Biden was sworn in as President. Here is more or less how it went.

“Don't worry about what happens at 12 p.m.,” wrote one QAnon influencer. “Watch what happens after that.”

And some appeared to realize that they'd been duped.

“It’s over,” one QAnon chat room participant wrote, just after Mr. Biden’s swearing-in.

“Wake up,” another wrote. “We’ve been had.”

Followers hoping for guidance from “Q,” the pseudonymous message board user whose posts power the movement, were bound to be disappointed. The account has been silent for weeks, and had not posted Wednesday. Ron Watkins, a major QAnon booster whom some have suspected of being “Q” himself, posted a note of resignation on his Telegram channel on Wednesday afternoon.

“We have a new president sworn in and it is our responsibility as citizens to respect the Constitution,” he wrote. “As we enter into the next administration please remember all the friends and happy memories we made together over the past few years.”

Do those false prophets, who conned so many, think they can just walk off the stage without any consequences? Though hard to fathom, we will deal with the fallout of America’s distrust in government. It became so great that many gave themselves over to a false prophecy, a false religion.

Perhaps it is good to hear from that great teacher Moses one more time: “Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die....”

“You must remain completely loyal to the LORD your God. Although these nations that you are about to dispossess do give heed to soothsayers and diviners, as for you, the LORD your God does not permit you to do so.”

We long to hear someone speak to us with authority. Indeed, we need a word from the Lord!

For that, we will need to go back to the source. To Moses. To the Prophet who is to come. We will want to see what becomes of this Jesus, who, Mark tells us, first showed us who he was by showing his mastery over these spiritual forces, by reminding us of the humility, the compassion, the servant leadership of Moses. His actions, his life, might just prove to be the very Word of God.