

Worship – January 31, 2021
First Congregational UCC, Eagle River, WI
Interim Pastor L. Gail Irwin

Announcements: Hello and welcome to worship at First Congregational UCC in Eagle River. This is the service for Sunday, January 31st. I'm glad you've joined us!

Today we'll be reflecting on real prophets and false prophets, who we trust and turn to for authority. I'll give you an opportunity to do some writing, so you may want to get out your journal or some paper to write your own reflections during the sermon.

I have a number of announcements to share:

Please pray for those who are grieving. In the month of January, our church is grieving with four families who have lost loved ones: the families of Chris Thomson, Robert Cole; and in the past week Dennis Burgy and Bette VandeHey both died.

And prayers go out to Helena Roerdink who took a fall last week, she is hospitalized but recovering.

This is a difficult time to take care of each other because of quarantine. But your prayers and cards will let others know you are with them in the Holy Spirit.

- This coming week there will be a series of **History Zoom** gatherings and everyone is invited to sign up for one. Look for a **Sign-Up Genius email** from Amy and choose the date you want to attend. Please sign up for only one gathering, and indicate the number from your family who are coming so I know how many to plan for.
- The **Faith Formation kids will meet with Miss Sharon by Zoom on Wednesday at 6:30 PM**. A Zoom link is included in the Friday email. You should have all gotten your King's Cake Kit and a video about how to make it. **You can make your cake any time**, but try not to eat it so you can show it off Wednesday night!
- **Next Sunday, February 7th**, worship will be a little different. We will do a one time experiment gathering by Zoom video conference. You don't need a Zoom account; you can just click on the Zoom link you will receive in next Friday's email, **but you will have to wait until 10:00 AM Sunday morning** when we will meet in real time. Our theme for worship will be **Why God Made Winter**. Bring your ideas! We'll share some winter hymns and we will share Communion by Zoom together!
- If you are unable to connect to Zoom, a recording of the service will be available later. Watch your email or Facebook for info.
- Thanks to our liturgists! If you want to be a liturgist, send me an email!

Let's begin worship with a prayerful reading of Psalm 146, taken from The Message version of the bible:

*Hallelujah! O my soul, praise GOD!
All my life long I'll praise GOD,
singing songs to my God as long as I live.
Don't put your life in the hands of experts who know nothing of life, of salvation life.
Mere humans don't have what it takes;*

*when they die, their projects die with them.
Instead, get help from the God of Jacob,
put your hope in GOD and know real blessing!
GOD made sky and soil, sea and all the fish in it.
{God} always does what he says—
defends the wronged, feeds the hungry.
GOD frees prisoners— and gives sight to the blind;
God lifts up the fallen.
GOD loves good people, protects strangers,
takes the side of orphans and widows,
but makes short work of the wicked.
GOD's in charge—always. Zion's God is God for good!
Let the people at home say: **Hallelujah!***

A Sermon for All Ages:

- We have a house cat named Minnie. We also have a pretend cat with real fur that looks like its real.
- They had never met! But this week, I introduced Minnie to the pretend cat and see what happened. Minnie was curious! She smelled the pretend cat all over carefully, but she wasn't fooled. She kept glancing outside to see if there were birds to watch. Then she came over by me, because she knows I'm her real friend.
- I tried to trick her, but Minnie knows real from fake.

- Do you think it was mean of me to try to trick Minnie? I wonder how that made her feel.

- Did you ever have someone fool you or tell you something untrue? Pretend to be your friend or promise you something they didn't do?
- Sometimes people are dishonest or try to fool each other to get something they want;
- After someone tells a lie or fools you, you don't want to trust them anymore.

- When Jesus first started preaching and doing miracles, a lot of people didn't believe in him yet; they'd been fooled and lied to by magicians and tricksters who told them things that weren't true. We call these people "false prophets".
- But Jesus was a real prophet; he spoke words he heard from God and did things God helped him do. He always told the truth.
- Over time, they watched and listened to Jesus. What he SAID matched what he DID. He made promises and kept them. He was the real thing: a true prophet from God.
- When people realized that, they grew to love and trust him and follow him. That's why he has so many disciples today, including us! He can be trusted!

- **Let's pray: Dear God, there are some people who tell lies or play tricks in the world. Help them stop doing that and be honest. And help us to know when people are telling the truth and when they're being "false prophets".**

Introduction to scripture: *As the bible tells it, Moses was able to speak with God face to face. But it was also believed that any human who encountered the face of God would die. In this reading from Deuteronomy, Moses explains that God will appoint a prophet, who will listen to God's voice and transmit God's message to the people. So, prophets became a way God speaks to humanity. Listen to...*

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20 (NRSV)

¹⁵ The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶ This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." ¹⁷ Then the LORD replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. ¹⁹ Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰ 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."

Intro: *When Jesus began his ministry, people had to discern whether he was a trustworthy prophet or not.*

Gospel of Mark 1:21-28 (The Message)

Then they entered Capernaum. When the Sabbath arrived, Jesus lost no time in getting to the meeting place. He spent the day there teaching. They were surprised at his teaching—so forthright, so confident—not quibbling and quoting like the religion scholars.

Suddenly, while still in the meeting place, he was interrupted by a man who was deeply disturbed and yelling out, "What business do you have here with us, Jesus? Nazarene! I know what you're up to! You're the Holy One of God, and you've come to destroy us!"

Jesus shut him up: "Quiet! Get out of him!" The afflicting spirit threw the man into spasms, protesting loudly—and got out.

Everyone there was spellbound, buzzing with curiosity. "What's going on here? A new teaching that does what it says? He shuts up defiling, demonic spirits and tells them to get lost!" News of this traveled fast and was soon all over Galilee.

Sermon

- I. A couple months ago, I ran into a friend I hadn't seen in a long time at the grocery store. In the course of the conversation, I mentioned that I had been a poll worker in my township for the election. Then she mentioned a story about a case of election fraud in another state. I looked at her blankly, not sure what to say. "I haven't heard that story," I said. She looked at me incredulously. "Don't you watch the news?"
 - a. Well, I do watch and read the news. My husband subscribes to about 5 weekly papers, in print, and they are always strewn all over the kitchen table.
 - b. I walked away wondering, How could a story that seemed so big to her have gone completely unnoticed by me? And then, I realized, "Oh, of course! She and I are reading *different news*." I get the Wall Street Journal, but not Cable.
 - c. Each of us are getting different versions of the truth; Every version probably has some kernel of truth; but sometimes those versions disagree with each other.
 - d. And with so many sources of news and social media, it's gotten harder to know who to trust, or even whether we can trust ourselves and our own perceptions of the truth.

- II. In the Deuteronomy reading today, Moses promises that God will send us prophets.
 - a. A prophet is someone who listens for God's voice, direction, and then shares what he/she hears with others.
 - b. Every period of biblical history has its prophets;
 - c. The Hebrew scriptures are full of fearless prophets who spoke out with God's words against injustice or sin or bad leaders; Jeremiah, Isaiah, Hosea, Amos...
 - d. But along with God's prophets there came *false prophets* who pretended to talk to God, or do magic on God's behalf; or predict the future, or spread stories that were not true: fake news!
 - e. The prophet Nathan made sure King David listened to God;
 - f. But other prophets were appointed by kings to make them *appear* more holy, to give his rulings a sort of religious rubber stamp of approval.
 - g. So, a good prophet can help people discern the will of God. But a false prophet can confuse, mislead and divide.

- III. In the modern era, we still look for people we can trust, like prophets, to speak the truth, to forecast trends for the future, to offer us wisdom and guidance.
 - a. We turn to scientists to help us understand climate change;
 - b. we choose certain news sources, either because we trust them, OR because *we know they will tell us what we want to hear!*
 - c. You might read certain authors or gurus;
 - d. And recently, some Christians have turned to self-proclaimed prophets who spew conspiracy theories and promote violent rebellion in the name of Christ.
 - a. How are we supposed to know who is trustworthy and who the false prophets are?

- IV. When Jesus went to Capernaum, early in his public ministry, people were listening to discern what kind of authority he wielded;

- a. because his message was provocative, they didn't know if they could trust him;
 - b. And right away they noticed a contrast between him and the scribes or religious scholars;
 - c. The scribes were like lawyers; educated, elite leaders who interpreted religious law; they were academics;
 - d. Some worked in the Temple, but others did the bidding of the Jewish king,
 - e. Either way, their expertise was used to uphold certain powerful institutions; this was a type of authority everyone recognized, but it wasn't *spiritual* authority.
- V. Jesus exerted a different kind of authority;
- a. He didn't have formal training as a rabbi or priest; or ecclesiastical authority like the scribes and pharisees.
 - b. But the people also knew some of the ancient prophets were untrained;
 - a. they were herdsmen and farmers and teenagers, ordinary people who were given spiritual authority by God;
 - c. In Jesus, they heard *a teaching that does what it says*
 - d. An integrity between word and deed; that was the spiritual authority of a prophet.
- VI. While he was teaching in Capernaum, a man with an unclean spirit came in and suggested that Jesus had come to destroy the people; he was setting doubt in people's hearts about Jesus and his message.
- a. And Jesus had the man's words knocked right out of his mouth;
 - b. He addressed the lie in the man's message, and said to the lie, "*Come out of him!*"
 - c. And when the lie was driven out, the people saw the truth revealed.
 - d. This was not just a healing miracle, where someone's ailment was healed;
 - e. it was a facing down of demonic power, the power of lies and division.
 - f. The lie was silenced so God's truth could be revealed.
 - g. People saw that and instinctively knew: here was a person with a deeper authority than the authority of laws and institutional religion.
 - h. It was things like that that helped people start trusting Jesus.

How do you discern who you will trust in this world, and what you will believe? Are you careful about who you choose to follow? Do you trust everyone? No one?

- VII. We're living in a time of increasing distrust between people and the leaders and institutions they used to trust.
- a. This is documented; social scientists have found the trust between people in the U.S. is declining faster than in some other countries, for a variety of reasons.
 - b. But even in the midst of distrust, we all crave honesty and integrity.

VIII. If you want, go get something to write on and answer these questions:

- a. Think of a time when you followed someone who betrayed your trust or led you in the wrong way. How did you know? What did you do? Did it change you?

- b. And now, think of some person or group you have grown to trust, who you rely on to tell you the truth; what is it like to have that person or group in your life?
 - c. Now think about yourself; are you trustworthy? Who trusts you? And are you living up to that trust?
- IX. We've all become aware of some false prophets in our world lately. I came across some criteria in a Religion News Service article by Thomas Reese, for discerning if the voices you listen to are trustworthy or not:
- **Follow the money:** biblical prophets were never rich. If the guru you're listening to is getting rich or just getting a lot of attention by spreading their message, be wary!
 - **Who does the prophet hang out with?** Is the leader or teacher keeping company with the poor, hearing real stories from real people; or does that person stay in an insulated bubble of powerful and wealthy people?
 - **Who does the prophet speak for?** Are they willing to make you uncomfortable by bringing up the needs of the marginalized, or are they busy making the powerful comfortable?
 - **HOW does the prophet speak?** With righteous anger or with hateful words? With compassion or with manipulative schmoozing? Does the prophet listen to God before speaking, or only to him/herself?
 - (a couple people who stand out to me as modern prophets with integrity are the Christian activist Shane Claiborne and Rev. William Barber, of the Poor People's Campaign; look them up and see what you think)
- X. Finally, remember that God has given you a prophetic voice too!
- a. Study your faith tradition; do the reflective homework! Don't just trust the pastor or televangelist or the latest guru with a best-selling book to tell you what is true; learn to articulate what you believe is true.
 - b. Test and strengthen your faith by talking to other Christians in a bible study or spirituality group; listen to God in prayer.
 - c. In the face of so many false teachings all around us, Christians need to listen carefully AND find our own prophetic voices.

Hymn: "O Grant Us Light" (Lawrence Tuttiett; Tune: Hesperus)

*O Grant us light, that we may know
Wisdom that you alone can give,
That truth may guide us as we go,
And virtue bless the lives we live.*

*O grant us light that we may find
Where error lurks in human lore,
And turn to you our seeking minds,
And love your holy word the more.*

*O Grant us light that we may learn
How dead is life from you apart,
How sure is joy for all who turn
To you an undivided heart.*

*O grant us light when soon or late
All earthy scenes shall pass away;
In you to find the open gate
To deathless home and endless day.*

Pastoral Prayer:

O God, speak to us with authority, and teach us to trust you.
Speak to our broken and divided hearts,
so that we might be made whole.
Remove the lies and cynicism from us;
Open us to hear your Word and embrace your truth.
to trust and proclaim your message, even in the face of falsehood.
Hear our prayers for those who are hurting today, and those in need;
For the hungry and those out of work, and the lonely...
For those grieving, including the Thomson, Cole, Burgy and VandeHey families;
For those healing, including Helena Roerdink...
And for all those we lift up in silence...
And hear our prayers of gratitude. help us never forget the blessings you have showered us with.
We trust you, God, to care for this world.
Make us trustworthy, too, so that your light of love, compassion and truth might shine in us.
We pray in the name of our Savior and Teacher, Jesus Christ, saying

The Lord's Prayer

Benediction/Blessing: God is always raising up prophets to share God's truth.
You might be one of them! Go in peace! Amen.