

Welcome / Announcements / Land Acknowledgement

As we gather in the name of Jesus we remember and acknowledge with gratitude the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – on whose traditional and unceded territory we gather. As we remember let us also recommit to reconciling relationships.

□ *Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary (repeat)*

Call to Worship

Jesus proclaimed to them the Reign of God, and they asked:

“What do you mean by that?”

Jesus freed them from illness of body and mind, and they asked:

“What’s going on here?”

Jesus challenged them to follow his Way, and they asked:

“Where will that take us?”

These are our questions too.

Guide us, O God, on our quest.

Help us to understand and respond as we join with one another to worship you.

Gathering Prayer / Words of Hope

Loving God, you are the wisdom behind all mystery – the glory hidden in all that makes us wonder – the strength in all that nourishes. With eyes open and spirits alert, we experience your glory around us. Scattered throughout the earth – smoldering deep inside us and radiating in acts of love – sparks of your glory reside. We feel joy each time we encounter you, so we gather to express our praise and gratitude for all the good we have experienced, knowing it all comes from your hand.

And yet, gracious God, we confess there are many times we forget you – focusing on what troubles us and ignoring the help you offer. We seek wisdom and meaning in the wrong places. In thoughtless moments, we harm the earth and each another. Forgive us. Remind us to live each day focused on your purposes revealed in Christ who loves us. Amen

Hear the good news: Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life has gone. New life has begun. Thanks be to God that we can make a new start, forgiven and set free.

□ *Today I awake*

Prayer for Understanding

O God, open our eyes to your Presence. Open our minds to your grace. Open our lips to your praises. Open our hearts to your love. Open our lives to your healing and be found among us today as we seek the wisdom of your Holy Word. Amen

Scripture **Deuteronomy 18: 15-20** **[OT 174]**

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. 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.”*

Then the Lord replied to me: *“They are right in what they have said. 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. 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.”*

Psalm 111 **displayed/responsive**

Praise the Lord!

**I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.**

Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.

**Full of honor and majesty are the works of the Lord,
whose righteousness endures forever, who has gained renown by wonderful deeds.**

The Lord is gracious and merciful. The Lord provides food for the faithful, ever mindful of the covenant.

The Lord has shown the people works of power in giving them the heritage of the nations.

The works of God’s hands are faithful and just;

all the precepts of the Lord are trustworthy.

They are established forever and ever,

to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

The Lord sent redemption to the people;

the Lord has commanded a covenant forever. Holy and awesome is the name of the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;

all those who live by it have a good understanding. The praise of the Lord endures forever.

Mark 1: 21-28 [NT 35]

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, *“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”*

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, *“Be silent, and come out of him!”*

And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, *“What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”*

At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message

Today's scripture readings are about authority – from the same word as author – one who creates – the source. The Hebrew Bible passage concerns the authority God will give to prophets like Moses – the authority to speak God's word and to lead the people in righteousness. The Gospel reading from Mark reveals the authority that Jesus holds – to command evil to depart and to teach in a manner unlike that of the Scribes and Pharisees.

Up to this point in Deuteronomy, the law has spelled out the role of kings and judges and priests. Each is invested with a distinct kind of institutional authority. However, over time these roles began to take on a rigid function in which *the structures based on these roles became inflexible and detached from the needs of the people. The roles became unresponsive to the changing religious and social circumstances of the community.*

So, we see in Deuteronomy how the author pivots to the corrective role of the prophet in the community of faith. As opposed to institutional rigidity, *prophets offered a measure of corrective challenge and the possibility of innovation.* You can see this in prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel and Hosea. In our context for today's reading the model of a prophet was someone more like Moses – raised up in the community and set apart from it to speak God's work into it.

Prophecy is about speaking up for what is right – not telling fortunes. And, although we may tend to see a prophet as a biblical character repeating messages from God, quite frequently, those messages sound very familiar: *take care of the vulnerable, seek*

peace, love justice, care for the earth and for each other. It seems as though the prophet speaks for all those in creation whose voices are being drowned out.

Our reading today raises a question you may have asked – a question that is obvious, urgent, devilishly difficult – a question as relevant today as when it was asked three thousand years ago: *How can we know when a message has – or has not – been spoken by God?* Plenty of people today and throughout history claim to speak in God's name – to know the divine mind. Seems audacious, doesn't it? And it has resulted over the years in genocide, holy wars, child sacrifice, widow burning, caste systems, female genital mutilation, witch hunts, ritual abuse, ethnic cleansing, suicide bombers, apartheid, defending slavery, and mass suicides — the list of religious violence claiming God's support is depressingly long, not to mention all the god-talk that is merely idiotic and insipid.

How do we know when someone claiming to speak the truth of God to us truly speaks with authority? How do we test what a prophet, priest or pastor says if their role is to unsettle – *to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted?*

There are so many who take advantage – who speak “truth” by wielding words as weapons and leaving their hearers shell-shocked, disheartened and desolate. A prophet like Moses speaks the truth in love – serves as mediator, intercessor and teacher of the law. Sounds to me much like the Jesus we are to emulate and follow.

The Deuteronomy passage could be read as a job description for prophets – ones who are to convey the words of the Lord in ways that can be understood and received by those to whom they are speaking. Those who act as intermediaries – called to a ministry of presence – speaking God's words, with nothing added or subtracted. They are to be accountable, as are those who hear the prophets' words. They are to avoid presumption – that is not brazen or transgressing proper boundaries but circumspect – cautious and careful, guarded and discreet.

Moses gave many excuses for why he couldn't be a prophet. Isaiah had a terrifying vision of the Holy God and a burning coal purifying his unclean lips. Jeremiah insisted that he was too young and that he *did not know how to speak*.

True prophets who are circumspect are painfully aware of the presumption inherent in claiming to speak for God. Who in their right mind would make such claims given the combination of human frailty and divine mystery? Every sane preacher has experienced the dread and shock of their preposterous calling – in some stumbling and bumbling way to speak a word that is true to God.

This "holy hesitancy" is well-founded. It's a daunting task, which cannot be approached without God's help. I mean, our text says that the penalty for false prophecy is death – a sobering reminder for all those preparing worship services, reflections or sermons! I think this is what my friend and colleague must have been warning me of when he

spoke at my ordination beginning with the chilling query: ***Laura Kavanagh, what do you think you are doing with the word of God on your lips?*** I honestly don't remember much after that – too busy trying find a way to disappear I imagine!

Don't get me wrong, I don't claim to be a prophet. However, there is no doubt that there is a certain professional and spiritual authority inherent in the role of preacher and pastor – authority I likely don't deserve given my own fallibility.

A favourite literary character of mine who possesses many qualities of a prophet, is the title character in John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. His birth was tragic, he was a member of the community and best friend to the book's narrator, John Wheelwright but, due to his short stature and his outsized voice (captured in the book using all caps), was always somewhat outside the community. His insights into people and his sense of being called by God for some purpose demonstrate his prophetic character. Consider this exchange between young Owen and his pastor Lewis Merrill...

Owen said, "IT'S TRUE THAT THE DISCIPLES ARE STUPID — THEY NEVER UNDERSTAND WHAT JESUS MEANS, THEY'RE A BUNCH OF BUNGLERS, THEY DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD AS MUCH AS THEY WANT TO BELIEVE, AND THEY EVEN BETRAY JESUS. THE POINT IS, GOD DOESN'T LOVE US BECAUSE WE'RE SMART OR BECAUSE WE'RE GOOD. WE'RE STUPID AND WE'RE BAD AND GOD LOVES US ANYWAY—JESUS ALREADY TOLD THE DISCIPLES WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN. 'THE SON OF MAN WILL BE DELIVERED INTO THE HANDS OF MEN, AND THEY WILL KILL HIM...' REMEMBER? THAT WAS IN MARK—RIGHT?"

(And the book's narrator continues...) But although he struggled to defend God's Holy Word, Lewis Merrill—for the first time, in my memory—appeared to be enjoying himself. To have his faith assailed perked him up; he was livelier and less meek.

When aptly executed, this is the wonderful, restorative work of a prophet – of any who profess to speak divine truth. To love the institution enough to challenge it – to love the community enough to push it – to love people enough to poke at them until they are *perked up, livelier and less meek*.

We offer what we can to God – in service of the divine – perhaps something paltry, selfish, singular – and God offers back something plural, gracious, universal. God never runs out of prophets – or words – or gracious commands by which to live. God is always for us – offering goodness in response to our triviality and creating opportunities for abundant life.

If I can, I hope to assail your faith so that you might be *perked up, livelier and less meek*. Despite my fear and trepidation – my own *holy hesitancy* – I try to embrace the responsibility to speak – to interpret and encourage, to challenge and offer hope, to tell

and retell the good news that reminds us all that God loves us and has come in Christ Jesus to save us. Amen

□ *Lord, the light of your love is shining*

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Offering and Prayer

Jesus' ministry was filled with challenge and choice. We face challenges and choices as we follow him. The invitation to make an offering week by week is a challenge. The gifts we choose to offer continue his ministry of healing and hope. Take the challenge and give as God has blessed you.

□ *Praise God from whom all blessings flow*

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Holy One we bring our gifts, asking you to bless them so that they may accomplish more than we can ask or imagine. Bless us, too, so that our lives speak of our choice to follow you, offering others healing and hope in your name. Amen

Congregational Meeting to provide an update from Session regarding ongoing collaboration/amalgamation plans with sister congregations in Victoria.

† Pastoral Prayers and the Lord's Prayer

Holy God, Lord of heaven and earth, your energy fills the cosmos and enlivens every cell of our bodies. You are around us, within us, and beyond us. Thank you for the simple pleasures of each day, and for the strength to meet the challenges that arise. When it feels like we have come to the end of our own resources, replenish us with the energy of your Spirit.

In these uncertain times, we are grateful for prayer in its many forms which lead us to communion with you – through word and silence – music and movement – feeling the Spirit's breath within us. Draw close to us whenever we need you and renew our spirits to continue serving you as best we can.

Hear us now as we pray for the earth – this precious, fragile home to all living things:

For declining species of plant and animal life...

For the earth's climate and places with too much or too little water...

For the oceans and rainforests – the skies and the air we breathe...

Teach us how to be more faithful stewards of your earth and to live more respectfully in your creation.

Hear us as we pray for the economy:

For those whose decisions shape it...

For employers and business owners...

For workers and those who cannot find work...

For all who seek economic justice – fairness and the common good – and those who struggle to discern what this means in a complex world...

Teach us how to care for our neighbours in these days of economic uncertainty.

We pray for our own circle of family and friends. Heal, bless, lead and encourage them...

We pray for neighbours and strangers in our community who face struggles and sorrows we can't even imagine...

Remind us that we belong to each other – to you – and help us respond to one another with compassion and kindness.

In silence, we bring to you the cares and hopes on our minds today...

Thank you for hearing the prayers of every heart as we join our prayers with all who follow Jesus, praying the words he taught... ***Our Father, who art in heaven – hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come – thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen***

□ ***To God be the glory***

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Blessing

Experience God's abundant love – be filled with jubilant praise for the Creator. Share your blessings – know the great joy of being generous. Have confidence to speak out against injustice in Jesus' name. And may the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God and the nurturing community of the Holy Spirit embrace us all.

□ ***Send me, Lord / Thuma mina***

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