

## Another Prophet?

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### **Deuteronomy 18:15-22 (NRSV)**

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.” You may say to yourself, “How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?” If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.

### **Acts 1:1-11**

*The book of Acts is the second part of Luke’s “orderly account” of a series of events that happened in Jerusalem, in Rome, and in many other places besides. It begins this way:*

In the first part of my book, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions to the apostles he had chosen through the Holy Spirit.

After his suffering, he showed himself alive to them in many convincing ways, as he continued to appear to them for forty days and to tell them about God’s kingdom. While he was with them, he ordered them, “Don’t leave Jerusalem, but wait for what the Father promised, which you heard about from me. John baptized with water, but not many days from now, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

So when they came together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It’s not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

After he said these things, while they looked on, he was taken up, and a cloud took him from their sight. They were still staring into heaven as he went, when suddenly two men dressed in white were standing beside them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will be coming the same way you saw him going into heaven.”

### **Children’s Story**

For as long as he could remember, Sammy the Squirrel had been listening to stories about the Old Owl. Stories about the Old Owl’s great power. Stories about the Old Owl’s great wisdom. Stories about the Old Owl’s great love.

The Old Owl was said to be the oldest and wisest animal in all the Great Forest.

Sammy listened to stories about the Old Owl, but he had never seen the Old Owl. Actually no one had ever seen the Old Owl, not for a long, long time.

Such a long time that some of the animals wondered if there really were an Old Owl. They wondered if the stories were exaggerations. They wondered if, maybe, the stories were just make-believe. It was hard for them to believe in something they had never seen.

But one rainy day, a whisper began to spread throughout the Great Forest. The Old Owl was coming back. A lynx had seen him – or maybe it was a fox or a groundhog.

Whoever it was, the Old Owl was coming back, coming back after such a long time of being away. The Old Owl was coming back, and that's all that mattered.

The news spread throughout the Great Forest, and all the animals prepared themselves. This was something they would not want to miss, not for anything.

### Sermon

Gayle N. read the Old Testament lesson last Sunday morning. It was Deuteronomy 34. The last chapter in the book of Deuteronomy. The last chapter in the Pentateuch – the five books of Moses. The last chapter in the Torah – the heart of the Jewish scriptures. Listening to Gayle read last Sunday, I heard something I hadn't heard before. I knew there was a sermon there, waiting to be preached. Listen again to a little bit of that chapter:

Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. . . . Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel (Deuteronomy 34:7-8,10-12 NRSV).

And with that, the Torah is ended.

**Deuteronomy 34 concludes the Torah on an ambivalent note.** On the one hand, there's a celebration of Moses. And why not? If God is the central character of the Torah – and he is – then Moses is the central human character of the Torah. Some traditions insist that Moses wrote the Torah. But those five books are the “books of Moses” because of Moses' central place in the story they tell, because of his central and indispensable place.

Through Moses, Israel was set free, no longer enslaved in Egypt. Moses proclaimed and delivered emancipation. Through Moses, God revealed his *mighty hand and outstretched arm*. Plagues descended upon Egypt. The sea split open. Bread fell from heaven. Through Moses, God made a covenant with Israel. God called Moses up onto the holy mountain. And to Moses God gave the Law that would form Israel into a *holy nation, a royal priesthood*. And, of course, through Moses, God brought Israel to the threshold of the Promised Land. Moses would not enter the land himself. But the people would, without a doubt. So the Torah concludes by celebrating Moses. And why not?

Yet the Torah also concludes with an expression of disappointment, of disillusionment even. That's what struck me last Sunday. There's a frank admission, as the Torah concludes, that the glory days are over. *Never again has there been anyone like Moses*, the Torah says.

It's important to recognize here that Deuteronomy 34 is not the work of Moses. The Pentateuch, the Torah, reflects much later experience, especially the experience of exile. (The Adam and Eve story, for example, is a story about exile, exile without return.) So much time has passed, as the Torah concludes – so much time has passed since Moses' day. The time of Joshua has passed. The time of the judges has passed. The time of David and Solomon has passed. The time of the divided kingdom has passed. The time of exile to Assyria and to Babylon has passed. And in all that time, the Torah laments in its

conclusion – in all that time, there has been no one like Moses. No wonder the Torah concludes on such an ambivalent note.

**And that ambivalence is not without reason.** The LORD God had lit the fires of expectation. He said, *I will raise up for them a prophet like you, Moses* (Deuteronomy 18:18). A prophet like you. Not like the soothsayers of Pharaoh. Not like the magi of Babylon. A prophet like you, Moses. And there had been prophets: individual, from-out-of-nowhere prophets; entire guilds of prophets; city prophets and country prophets; famous prophets and forgettable prophets; true prophets and false prophets.

Some of these prophets had been undeniably great. Elijah confronted the powerful, and they were brought down. Amos warned of trouble sure to come, and he was proved right. Jeremiah vividly portrayed the plight of the nation and offered wise counsel for how to live in exile. They were great prophets, every one of them. We remember them today. Yet not one of those prophets had approached the stature of Moses – *Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face* (Deuteronomy 34:10). It's no wonder the Torah ends on that ambivalent note.

People in exile, or suffering the after-effects of exile, are prone to compare, to compare the glorious past to the gray and gloom they feel every day. And while they remember and celebrate the glorious past, they can't help feeling disappointed about today, disillusioned even.

**But the story of Israel does not end with Deuteronomy 34.** The story of Israel does not end, either, with a succession of greater and lesser prophets. Nor does the story of God and the world end there. (Don't ever forget: the story of Israel is the story of God and the world; God always has more than Israel in mind.) The story doesn't end. The story continues.

In the Christian tradition, we have an idea of what to do with Deuteronomy 18. We have an idea of what to do with the disappointment, disappointment that no one like Moses ever shows up in the story again. Jesus Christ is our Moses, our Moses and more. He is a prophet, like Moses, but more. Not a prophet whom God knew face to face, but a prophet who himself is the face of God. Jesus Christ is our Moses and more. He is a powerful figure, like Moses. He exerts power over wind and water, for example. But he also has power over life and death. Jesus Christ is our Moses and more. He confronts ruling powers, like Moses. But unlike Moses, who defeated those powers by unleashing destruction and death, Jesus defeats the powers by dying himself – and rising.

The story does not end with Deuteronomy 34. The story does not end with Moses, dead and buried. The story continues with Jesus, dead and buried, then free from his tomb and alive forever! That's what we celebrate.

**Yet aren't we disappointed and disillusioned, too?** Jesus is gone. Jesus ascended. He's not here, not in the flesh. And there have been no prophets since Jesus. Muslims have Muhammad. Mormons have Joseph Smith. Roman Catholics have an infallible pope. TV Christians have TV preachers who are always hearing from God. But there have been no other prophets like Jesus – or even like Moses. We know better than that. And we're not about to listen to anyone who claims to have seen God face to face and to have a message for us.

But we do want another prophet, don't we? That's why we keep creating prophets and quasi-prophets. (Just look at the religious best-sellers.) We want to hear from God. We want to know what's expected of us. We want to know we're not alone. We want to know that this world has a future. We want to know that our souls have a future. We want to know that our bones have a future. We want to hear something new – not different, just new – we want to hear something new, not just two thousand year old echoes.

*This Jesus . . . you see him going; he will be coming back.* That's what the angels said to the apostles. And it contains both our disappointment and our hope. Disappointment because there is no promise of another prophet. There was a promise of another prophet like Moses. But there will be no other like

Jesus. So we're disappointed, disappointed by two thousand years of silence, by two thousand years since God has shown his face around here. Two thousand years is a long time.

But Jesus will be coming back. There won't be another prophet like Jesus coming to us, because Jesus will be coming to us. We don't know when. It's not given to us to know *times or seasons the Father has fixed by his own authority*. Instead it is given to us to wait, to wait in faith, to wait for Jesus, who will be coming.

**And we aren't disappointed, not really.** Jesus is with us, even though he's away from us. Jesus is with us in the Scriptures. He still speaks, if only we take up and read his Word. Jesus is still with us in the sacraments, in water and bread and wine. Through the sacraments we are united with Christ, not symbolically but actually, united with him in his death and resurrection, united with his body and blood. And Jesus is with us through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the living presence of Jesus with us, with us individually and as a body of Christ. With us with this result: by the Holy Spirit we become the living presence of Jesus. And so Jesus is present to the world through us, and we become the presence of Jesus to one another – all by acts of love and justice and mercy and faithfulness.

And this isn't just about the few of us who gather here. This is about all the people of God, all the saints. There is a vast number of people, a *great cloud of witnesses*, the Bible says – there is a vast number of people who have been through the ages and continue to be today the living presence of Jesus in the world, the faces through which the face of Christ is seen – Bill N. can tell you about a young Muslim man he knows who has recently been seeing that face – the face of Christ, who has died, who is risen, who is coming again.

And so, because of Jesus, we don't live in disappointment, we live in hope. Our hope is not in election results. Our hope is not in investment returns. Our hope is not in a medical prognosis. Our hope is in Jesus Christ, who has come, who is coming again, and who is with us and with the world God loves, right now.