

Sermon notes from CMJ
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany - Year B

Readings - Deuteronomy 18:15-20, Psalm 111, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28

Introduction - Epiphany celebrates the revelation of the incarnation of Jesus and His revelation to the peoples of the world. That celebration continues for a time as there are six Sundays in the Christian calendar that comprise the season of Epiphany. Today's readings reveal that Jesus has the authority to not only teach the Scriptures but also authority over the powers of darkness.

Common Theme - The Hebrew Bible had prophesied a coming redeemer, one like Moses. This was to be a fulfillment of His promises to Israel and thus His covenant. This raises two questions: how would you recognize who this Messiah was, and what would distinguish him from a false claimant? Today's readings reflect some of the qualities we expect to find revealed in Jesus of Nazareth.

Hebraic Perspective - Moses has been the teacher, guide, and lawgiver of Israel since the Exodus from Egypt. The Israelites had known no other leader. Moses however will not be joining Israel as they cross the Jordan, and the people of Israel may have expressed anxiety as to their future rulers. Moses says that the Lord will choose prophets for the people and will raise up a prophet like Moses. Deuteronomy 18:15 has several levels of meaning. There will be a prophet for each generation and, like Moses, they will speak God's word and be a guide and balance for the people and the king. Each king had his own prophet. The relationship between prophet and king, both appointed by God, was often a tense one. Solomon remains the only monarch not to have a functioning prophet during his reign. "A prophet like me" can also be read as a single entity or person. Thus another Moses was to be expected as a preeminent shepherd of the people. He would be a redeemer, challenge the kings of the earth, a lawgiver, miracle worker, and mediator for Israel and later the nations, too. Hope is given to Israel. Prophets will always be with them so the people can always hear the words of Heaven. And a messianic hope is brought to the people in the form of the ultimate redeemer, known as the Messiah. Each generation would hold to the hope that their generation would herald the one like Moses.

First Reading: Deuteronomy 18:15-20 - Before there were kings or priests for the people of God there were prophets, and Moses was the first of them. Thus the highest authority in the Hebrew Bible did not belong to the king or to the priesthood, but to the prophet. During the Second Temple period, the expectation was for "the coming Prophet" as part of the messianic age. After Jesus performed the miracle of feeding 5,000 people, the Gospel of John records the people declaring, "surely this is the Prophet!" (John 6:14).

Moses does speak here in the singular. Verse 15 says, "the Lord will raise up a prophet like me," so clearly the coming one will be like Moses. The Lord Himself adds that the coming one will have the words of God in his mouth. Thus the tradition became that one quality of the Messiah is that he will be able to teach the Word of God.

Second Reading: Psalm 111 - This psalm is a very uplifting song of praise. The opening verse to praise the Lord is an imperative, thus the worshipper is drawn into the request to praise God. The psalm begins with the great deeds of the Lord which reflect His righteousness, majesty, and greatness. We remember His wondrous deeds, and He remembers His covenant and promises. The works of God are called faithful and just, and we

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can conclude that God will be faithful to bring about His promises spoken through the Torah and the Prophets. God will indeed send a redeemer. Verse 9 links His covenant with redemption and connects it also with the Name of God. Interestingly the last verse of this psalm is recited by orthodox Jews following ritual handwashing. It reminds us that, in all the goodness of the works of God and His faithful promises, our response should not only be one of praise but also a healthy “fear of the Lord.”

Third Reading: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 - Idolatry in the ancient world was prolific. Much of the meat in Greek and Roman culture was “sacrificed” to various pagan deities as part of the food preparation. Usually, the Jewish people did not partake in pagan festivals nor consume sacrificial foods. Paul was making comments to the Gentile Christians in Corinth on the permissibility of food offered to idols. Paul appears to permit foods in the theological sense, in that pagan idols are essentially “nothing” as there are no other gods besides God. However, in fellowship, he does forbid pagan food for the sake of the community.

Fourth Reading: Mark 1:21-28 - The season of Epiphany concerns the revelation of Jesus to the world. The Gospel of Mark is clear to reveal Jesus as the new Moses. As Moses was a great teacher, bringer of the Word to the people, and doer of miracles, then so too is Jesus. He teaches the Word of God in the synagogue with authority, which all who hear can perceive. Jesus is greater than Moses as today’s text reveals that Jesus also has authority over the demonic. Together the teaching and demon cleansing reveal that one greater than Moses had indeed appeared.

Hebraic Context - Exorcism was common in the ancient world. The usual method for getting rid of demons involved a variety of prayers, incantations, and magic spells. Judaism of the late Second Temple period had a well-developed system for exorcism. We meet Jewish exorcists in Acts 19 that were not disciples of Jesus. Demonic activity seems to have been prevalent in the ancient world. According to the historian Josephus, King Solomon performed exorcisms, and incantations attributed to him are found in *Sefer HaRazim* (the forbidden Book of Magic). According to the Gospels, Jesus performed 24 exorcisms, and exorcisms were also part of the practice of the early church. The Greek word used in Mark 1:26 to describe the spirit is *ἀκάθαρτος* (*akathartos*), usually translated as “impure.” The word can also be translated in context as “foul” or “evil.” Judaism was very concerned with ritual impurity before the Lord. Impurity could be caused by demonic activity in the form of possession or disease.

About the author

The Rev. Aaron Eime is the deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied at the Hebrew University in the Master’s program with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied Psychology and Sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek, is fluent in German and Hebrew, and has taught internationally including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.