

Sermon – Epiphany 4, Series B, Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28
January 29, 2012 – Cross Lutheran Church – “PB’s Last Sermon”

I searched for a humorous story or two, just to “break the ice” on such a day like today. The first story is about a fellow who opened a tub of margarine and there, in the margarine, was the face of Jesus. He took it around to his Chinese neighbor, who shook his head and said, "I can't believe it's not Buddha."

Another story is of the pastor who is starting the Ash Wednesday service, a time for solemn reflection....“Dear Lord,” the minister began, with arms extended toward heaven and a rapturous look on his upturned face, “without you, we are but dust...” He paused long enough for a 4-year-old girl in the front row to ask her mother, “Mom, what is butt dust?”

And yet one more story...It’s the last sermon in the parish, worst case scenario : The pastor has had a very rough time. He has had confrontation after confrontation with the council, and is really fed up. But, he gets the “last word”, so carefully chooses the Bible verses on which to speak. They are Matthew 27:5, and the last half of Luke 10:37, which read:

(Matthew 27:5) [Judas] ...went and hanged himself .

(Luke 10:37b) Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.”

Last sermon in the parish, BEST case scenario...and here we are. I have thought that there had to be a perfect Bible passage and story, to start this last sermon with you. Even with a couple months to think about it and plan, I’ve concluded that there is no perfect verse, or sermon to accompany.

But the passages we DO have for today offer a remarkable connection, for me, and for this occasion. They speak loudly and clearly of what is on my heart and mind. First from the OT lesson for today: we have Moses, who is giving HIS last sermon! As many of you know, it is nearly the entire book of Deuteronomy. Don’t worry, I won’t read these particular 21 chapters for my text! But just 2 verses from today’s OT lesson say a lot:

First, Moses says this: 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....***then he adds, ¹⁷***Then the LORD replied to me: I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.***

Please don't get me wrong—I'm not trying to compare myself to Moses! But isn't there at least a small similarity to the situation? With my retirement, haven't you wondered about my replacement? Even though you know who is preaching for the next 3 weeks, and even though you know the Board is meeting with a potential interim this coming Thursday already, don't you still feel a bit anxious about all of that?

THAT's what Moses is speaking to: to that difficult time of transition that will surely be happening after he is gone. And what is his message? The same that we can say today: God is taking care of it! God will provide! God will bring that person to you! There will be another "prophet", to continue the leadership of God's people here at Cross Lutheran.

Now, the Hebrew word for prophet is simply, "one who speaks for God". It's NOT really a future-teller, though that is the popular misconception that is out there, and that's probably what we all would like to be able to hear. Instead, prophets were those special spokespersons who spoke God's word for a particular situation. Indeed, sometimes they afflicted the comfortable, and spoke of God's judgment; they also comforted the afflicted, to bring hope and healing.

(This brings to mind the very first preaching book that I had, my first year of seminary. It was a little book written by the preaching professor, Stanley Schneider. It's title: As One Who Speaks For God...the Why and How of Preaching.)

I have certainly been honored to preach and proclaim God's word among you for these 25 years. While you have come to know me more as one who speaks hopeful words rather than condemnatory ones, it has been a privilege and honor to do so. Because when we take on this responsibility together—both the proclaiming AND the hearing of God's Word—then the result is that we more clearly hear about God's love, God's grace, God's gift of life, in Jesus Christ, and incorporate it into our lives.

I believe we have had terrific encounters with God's word. Some have happened in the Kerygma Bible studies, for which several of you joined with me as teachers, including Bob Manion, Naomi Loose, Kevin Hoffman, and my wife Elaine. Kevin especially is one who brings those biblical insights to the confirmation classes week after week, year after year.

Also, I think the Tuesday morning Bible study has grown even more enjoyable during the past 2 years. We have had a good time learning and sharing about the book of Acts, and the Gospel of Luke, and a whole lot more. As we go through Scripture, chapter by chapter, so many have engaged and grown together.

True, there have been times when we have disagreed over the interpretation of God's word. How we apply God's word to life is always a challenge, and there can often be divergent ways of doing so. But Cross has been a congenial "audience", as you diligently look for God's Word of life and love and hope. In a world that seems to dwell on disaster stories, and nit-picking between candidates running for public office, and just what it was that Demi Moore had in her blood stream when that 911 call occurred (!)—we need that word of life and love and hope.

I think the most personal, and poignant times of preaching God's Word are those times of great sadness, at the death of a loved one. These are some of the most intimate of family times, and the most vulnerable situations God's people can be in. And you have invited me, trusted me, to be the one who speaks God's word to you.

I shared with you last fall, that at Cross since I've been here, there have been 370 funerals...not all done by me, of course, and many were of the community and not just Cross members. Still, 370 is a pretty significant number. And you and I both know the disproportionate number of young people whose deaths have happened right here at Cross. How important, to hear comfort, peace, hope proclaimed at those times, from God's Word!

But, also while I have been pastor here, Cross has experienced 447 baptisms—some of the most joyous of times, for a family, and for the larger congregational family of faith!

In short, as a pastor who is specifically called to be the "one who speaks for God", I am privileged to share with so many of you, including everyone here this morning, this awesome task of sharing that word of life, and love, and hope. Together we have confronted God's Word, and in turn been confronted by it. We have experienced the depths, and also the heights, of life together as God's people. As we have both strived to be hearers of God's word together, I hope and pray that we have been able to strike a balance, between Law and Gospel, between Demand and Gift, between conviction that hits us like a two by four up

the side of the head, and also the gracious healing and conversion, that turns our hearts and spirits, to life, and to love, and to hope.

As Luther put it: **Luther declares,**
"God's Word cannot be without God's people and conversely, God's people cannot be without God's Word."

I am certain that Luther, and Moses himself, would give this advice: Keep at it! Keep listening! Keep digging! Keep learning! Keep growing in your understanding and eagerness to live that word!

The other passage that seems to be equally relevant for this day and this occasion is the Jesus story for today. Only it's not about the ending of a ministry, like the Deuteronomy story is. In fact, it's at the very start of the ministry of Jesus, in the very 1st chapter of this year's Gospel of Mark. Jesus appears in the temple, and apparently it's his 1st Bible study. He begins teaching, and the reaction to him is amazing! **"He taught them as one having authority..."** very differently than what they had experienced. Moreover, there's a confrontation, with a man who has an unclean spirit. (Or, as The Message version puts it, a man who was "deeply disturbed and yelling out")

We're not exactly sure what kind of temporary or long-term situation this was...And, I'm not suggesting that we have ever had such an outbursting event at Cross, at least in the past 25 years. We've had some outbursts from the puppets and from various chancel dramas and skits over the years; just last week, we all saw that Mike Berry had a terrible outburst of wailing and moaning! In the little skit he and Sherry Dittrich did, he was "terribly upset" when he realized that my retirement would ALSO involve taking Elaine with me!

But at the start of Jesus ministry, what Jesus was confronting, is perhaps not just an isolated incident, but the tip of the iceberg of what challenges he had before him. One commentator introduce this passage this way:

The story has barely begun, and already the battle is joined. Jesus sides with humanity against every force that would bring death and disease. These forces recognize Jesus and know what his power means for them. This, however, is only the first fight. The war will go on much longer.

And that is the truth of ministry at Cross Lutheran Church! My particular role is done; our relationship as pastor and congregation ends. But ministry and the opportunities are all around us! The “battle” goes on!

And we have battled, haven't we? We have battled, in the name of Christ, to provide a safe community, and some respite for homeless and hungry people, in the weeks that we have sponsored the MCREST guests, and in the community suppers that help to provide a solid and nutritious meal for some needy and lonely people. And when we do, we give the “unclean spirits” of poverty and hunger a major punch in the gut.

We have welcomed all kinds of people at Cross, old and young, former Catholics and former other church members, and the unchurched. We welcome gay and straight, people from other nationalities such as our CELI friends. And when we do, we give the “unclean spirits” of intolerance and prejudice a solid sock on the jaw.

We have trained lay leaders to be Caring Callers, Stephen Ministers, and Home Communion Visitors, who often stay connected to those they care for, for months, if not years. And when we do, we battle those “unclean spirits” of grief and depression and isolation with quality connections that can bring life, and love, and hope...

In closing, I DO think that the apostle Paul nailed it, with how he concluded his letter to dear friends and fellow believers in Philippi. So I simply share his words, from Philippians 4:

Philippians 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. **5** Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. **6** Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. **7** And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I believe that with all my heart: The Lord IS near, to lead and provide that leadership in the future. Cross will continue to “battle”, in ministry and in faith, all those challenges that may confront you. There will always be—through God's grace and power in Jesus Christ—the life, and love, and hope to carry you through. AMEN.