

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

15“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed—16just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’17And the LORD said to me, ‘They have rightly said all that they have spoken.18I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.19And whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.20But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’”

DIAGNOSIS: Divining God’s Will via the Law

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Divining the Divine Will*

Moses is attributed by our ghost-writer here with establishing a line of prophets through whom Yahweh will henceforth convey his divine will for Israel, and ultimately the world. Moses stresses two crucial criteria for such would-be prophets (speakers for God): First, don’t you dare be like the heathen, don’t even think to work through soothsayers, sorcerers, charmers, mediums, wizards, or necromancers (vv. 10-11). Second, make absolutely sure that what you say comes from God and not some other lesser god (vv. 19-20). Perhaps we should add, even our own “educated” opinions.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Speaking What*

Comes Naturally

Moses has to give these warnings because he is acutely aware how overwhelming it is to succumb to exactly those temptations. Most especially, it is just way too tempting to believe that one speaks for God when one confronts injustice and demands justice. That would be speaking God's Law, which is hard-wired into us all and captivates us. It comes, oh, so naturally. Consequently, we crusade to make sure sinners and sins get punished, absolutely confident that we are voicing the divine will. Which of course we are, but remember, it's the first part—his first word. On the other hand, God's second Word, his word of Promise, doesn't come naturally to us. Mercy? Forgiveness? Letting sinners off? That just rubs the wrong way. No, let's concentrate on that first word and call that the divine will.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *"Or else you will die"*

Misrepresenting Yahweh has serious consequences: "that same prophet shall die" (v. 20). But then, so does restricting God to only his word of Law. Ironically, when we insist that God remain a demanding, critical judge, he honors that insistence and makes sure the Law does get fulfilled, all the way to its deadly conclusion—especially on us crusaders who would just as soon administer God's divine will without God!

PROGNOSIS: Divining God's Will via the Promise

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Divine divines His Will*

Back in exilic times, this passage was already interpreted as being a word of Promise from God, as the first hint of a Messiah, a rescuer from the consequences of God's own Law. And of course we now know that indeed, at the exact right time, God made good on that Promise. The prophet whom God promised to

“raise up...and put my words in his mouth,” who would “speak to them all that I command him” (v. 18) arrived as a helpless infant born in Bethlehem. His name is Jesus. The “words”—which we “hear” through his suffering, death, and resurrection—are words of not just demand (the Law), but of compassion and forgiveness. At the cross, BOTH words about God’s will are realized, when Jesus takes the whole Law into himself and suffers it out of existence, guaranteeing that mercy and forgiveness (gospel) overcome the Law.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting*

Promises are received and come true when they are believed. Promise-trusters discover that an amazing “makeover” occurs within them. Simply because they trust the promise—that is, they trust Jesus—their very natures get altered, as if a new spirit has taken possession of them. This new spirit no longer automatically defaults to the old rules and regulations of the Law, but instead, defaults to God’s second word, which generates a new spirit—one of mercy, love, and forgiveness within the truster. In fact, that is Jesus’ own Spirit operating within.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Speaking/Living the Divine Will*

Promise-trusters, or as we say now, Jesus-trusters, confidently join the line of prophets—diviners of God’s will—trusting that their messages from God convey both his will for peace and justice, and his will for mercy and forgiveness. Because, after all, it is God’s divine will that all people revel in being his beloved children. In the actual living of it all out, these trusters discover that it’s not the haranguing and condemning that change people and fulfill God’s will. Instead, it is the compassion and mercy, enabled by Jesus, that makes God’s will come true on earth. Who knew?