

What God Does: Challenging

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Deuteronomy 18:15-20
on January 28, 2018 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

It's good to be back with you in worship this week, friends! Our family traveled last weekend to Louisville, Kentucky, where we were privileged to join hundreds of others in our former church to celebrate their longtime pastor, Joe Phelps. Joe was retiring after 40 years of ministry, 21 of those years spent at Highland Baptist. At the service of celebration for his long ministry, members of the pastor search committee of 1997 led in various ways throughout worship, recalling their unconventional process by which they came to know, love, and feel called to Joe.

"He wasn't our first choice," the former chair of the committee reminded us, as he held up "The Binder" filled with notes and quotes from their committee on a journey. Rather, another candidate had their attention along the way, and had even gone so far as come to the church in view of a call to be introduced to the congregation, immediately after which he got cold feet and pulled out. It was in that raw place of woundedness and fear that they met Joe, a young Texan church planter who had never shied away from confronting the powers-that-be with public calls back to God's gospel of Love. These search committee folks remembered with a chuckle their central question about Joe — with his bent towards radical justice and advocacy for the least of these and his

job to proclaim good news on behalf of God, was he going to be *just* the spark their congregation needed to ignite their unique sense of calling into the world, or would he be a flamethrower whose particular passions engulf the church such that they all would be consumed? Spark ... or flamethrower?

We're nearing the end of our series in worship called "What God Does," and today we turn to the story of Moses from the Book of Deuteronomy to explore how and why God challenges. Deuteronomy concludes at Moses's death with a clear reminder of the magnitude of Moses's influence, saying "never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face."¹ The role of prophet is what we dig into today, a role that, as we learn from Deuteronomy, is one who will proclaim God's word from among the people.

The text calls "the one the Lord raises up" a 'prophet,' which literally in the Hebrew means both "one who is called" and "one who calls." That distinction — called and calling — is vitally important to understand the role of a prophet.² In fact, throughout the vast writings of our holy scriptures, we learn a thing or two about prophets in the biblical tradition. Prophets in ancient Israel were, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, "specific, uncredentialed individuals who made 'out of the ordinary' utterances, and who were understood as having a peculiarly intimate

¹ Deuteronomy 34:10

² David Forney, "Deuteronomy 18:15-20," *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, p292.

connection with the Lord, which made them effective channels of communication between the Lord and Israel."³ These prophets speak because they cannot *not* speak. Summoned so fully and completely by God, prophets in these old, old stories "speak concretely to a particular time, place, and circumstance... [their utterances evoking] a crisis circumstance where none had been perceived previously."⁴ In "images and metaphors that aim to disrupt and destabilize," prophets challenge the accepted reality of these particular communities by invoking an alternative one filled with God's possibility and imagination for their urgent consideration.⁵ And as today's text reminds us, prophets are called by God in the shape of Moses; that is, to liken their ministry in their time and place to Moses's ministry of liberation and challenge.

Framed within the context of our tradition's deep history of prophetic voices that roots all the way back to Moses himself and none more so than Jesus, I suppose it's not too far a stretch to imagine that God desires to challenge us through the voices of people, right? Think back with me for a moment to the times in your life where you have felt called by God to something or away from something else. Do you remember sensing that holy nudge through the voices of real people around you? Did you feel a pressing upon that which you'd always held to be true because

³ Walter Brueggemann, "The Prophet as Mediator," *Theology of the Old Testament*, p622-623.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p624.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p625.

of the presence of a person in your life who disrupted it in unexpected ways? Through the challenge of another (either welcomed or uninvited), did you come to understand God more fully? Perhaps, then, there was a spark of the prophetic voice in your life!

But pastor search committees aren't the only ones of us who wonder about that spark or flamethrower question. Subconsciously or not, we all do that to one another too, right? If we end up having a positive experience with a disruptive voice like I just described, then we feel a certain confidence that this would be a voice to trust. But if we encounter a new idea, a different way of thinking than our own, or even a relationship that stirs up for us conflict with the way we've always viewed something, it's still only natural to flinch, to turn away, to immediately find reasons why this way of thinking or being is at least suspect, or at most, wrong. And so we read books by authors we know or are recommended to us by trusted friends who are certain we'll love them. We listen to radio stations and podcasts, harmonious with the interests or ideologies or ideas we're already nurturing. We consume news from channels and sites who share our bent, shape our daily and weekly activities around relationships with people who share our values, and participate in communities who share our background or cultural place. And then when all of this natural human behavior plays itself out online, where social media giants can sort through our likes, posts, and clicks to cultivate a picture of who we are and what we believe and thus tailor our online

experience to affirm and reaffirm that constructed identity, we become more segregated than ever before in the echo chambers of our own making and eventually become "victims to our own biases."⁶

You have to wonder — why do we do all that? Why is it that we feel this undeniable pull towards that which we already know and believe and do and understand? Like the man with an unclean spirit that Jesus encountered, we humans too are possessed. Theologian and modern-day prophet Walter Wink once said, "Our society is possessed, Christians as much as anyone. We are possessed by violence, possessed by sex, possessed by money,"... to which I would add, "possessed by fear, possessed by what we could stand to lose, possessed by a desire for certainty."⁷ When we feel consumed by our own opinions, beliefs, privileges, and way of life, or when we live creates for us raw places of woundedness and fear, anything or anyone that could threaten us causes us to seize up, grab hold of, double down on, and possess even further that which we feel we need to control and protect.

I'll never forget the time I had one of those worldview-shaping conversations with a friend of mine from college named Jay. On paper, we

⁶ Great turn of phrase from Mostafa M. El-Bermawy in his article that describes the urgency of this phenomenon, "Your Filter Bubble Is Destroying Democracy," *Wired Magazine*, <https://www.wired.com/2016/11/filter-bubble-destroying-democracy/>. Also - in the 2011 Christian Community Developers Association conference in New Orleans, I heard theologian Soong-Chan Ra speak about how one's worldview is developed and nurtured, and it more than any other reading or lecture has helped me to understand this concept.

⁷ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*.

were incredibly similar — both kids of ministers with hometown roots in South Carolina, music majors, Christians, and good friends. That day over lunch in the dining hall at Furman, somehow our group table conversation meandered into the hottest of hot button issues. My memory was that while the rest of our friends found thoughtful, amiable ways to talk about a topic in which there was inevitable disagreement, neither Jay nor I could do that. As the conversation evolved, we both dug in our heels planted firmly on either side of a line in the sand, and as those heels dug, our emotions flamed and our voices rose. Slowly, the friends around our table began to raise their eyebrows and, annoyed with us, got up to leave. People from tables right around us turned to stare and whisper. But neither of us could let it go — I remember feeling like I couldn't stop this conversation until Jay understood how wrong he was and how right I was. Of course, that never happened. To my chagrin, he never repented or changed his mind. But since I'm standing here today, we somehow found a stopping point and left that college cafeteria long after everyone else had.

In my young mind, his ideas weren't just misguided, they were dangerous and threatened everything I thought I understood about how God and the world worked. Within that discomfort and raw place of fear, my own immaturity to handle challenge with care caused our friendship to change that day, our raging fire of debate cooling our friendship to ashes. But I kid you not, nearly every time this topic surfaces in my mind or conversation, I think of Jay and what he taught me that day. Were I to

have the opportunity to do it all over, I would tell my 18 year-old self to calm down, open up, speak in love, and listen carefully — for I might just be hearing a word from the Lord.

Sisters and brothers, I wonder what might happen if we leaned into the times we felt challenged instead of reacting in anxiety or anger. I wonder what might happen if instead of flaming out in fear, we welcomed those voices among us who challenge our “accepted realities of life by introducing an alternative one filled with God’s possibility and imagination for our urgent consideration.”⁸ I wonder what might happen if we ourselves summoned some courage in the manner of Moses, called and calling by God to proclaim boldly God’s dream of Love in Christ for this world. I wonder what might happen if we celebrated the challenge we offer one another in our diversity rather than shrinking into the silos of a shallow uniformity. I wonder what might happen if we cultivated prophetic community here at First on Fifth, becoming transformed by God’s voices of challenge who see a better way than what we see, a higher calling than what we hear, a deeper truth than what we know. I wonder if it might be just the spark we don’t even know we need.

⁸ Brueggemann, p625.