

## **“A New Prophet”**

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

January 31, 2021 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

## **Hymns for Worship Video – January 31, 2021**

**“Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer” #651 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1-3**

(words adapted for consistency with the Book of Praise)

*John Hughes / Peter Williams / William Williams*

© Words: Public Domain Music: Public Domain CCLI License # 1952948

Guide me O Thou great Redeemer

Pilgrim through this barren land

I am weak but Thou art mighty

Hold me with Thy pow'rful hand

Bread of heaven Bread of heaven

Feed me now and ever more

Feed me now and ever more

Open now the crystal fountain

Whence the healing stream doth flow

Let the fire and cloudy pillar

Lead me all my journey through

Strong Deliverer strong Deliverer

Be Thou still my strength and shield

Be Thou still my strength and shield

When I tread the verge of Jordan

Bid my anxious fears subside

Death of death and hell's destruction

Land me safe on Canaan's side

Songs of praises songs of praises

I will ever give to Thee

I will ever give to Thee

**“Silence! Frenzied, Unclean Spirit” #729 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1-3**

(tune of “All the Way my Saviour Leads me”)

*Words: © Thomas H. Troeger Words: © Oxford University Press, 1985*

*Music: © Andrew Donaldson Music: © Andrew Donaldson, 1996*

“Silence! Frenzied, unclean spirit” cried God’s healing, Holy One

“Cease your ranting! Flesh can’t bear it.

Flee as night before the sun.”

At Christ’s voice the demon trembled

From its victim madly rushed

While the crowd that was assembled

Stood in wonder, stunned and hushed

Lord, the demons still are thriving in the grey cells of our mind  
 Tyrant voices, shrill and driving,  
 Twisted through that grip and bind  
 Doubts that stir the heart to panic  
 Fears distorting reason's sight  
 Guilt that makes our loving frantic  
 Drams that cloud the soul with fright

Silence, Lord the unclean spirit in our mind and in our hearts  
 Speak your word that when we hear it  
 All our demons shall depart  
 Clear our thought and calm our feeling  
 Still the fractured, warring soul  
 By the power of your healing  
 Make us faithful, true and whole

Closing Chorus: "Go now and live for the Saviour"

*Kurt Kaiser*

© 1967 Curb Word Music (Admin. by WC Music Corp.) CCLI License # 1952948

Go now and live for the Saviour  
 Go may this joy be your joy too  
 Go may His presence ever guide you  
 Go live this life the whole day through

**Scripture Texts: Deuteronomy 18:15-20**

<sup>15</sup> The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. <sup>16</sup> 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." <sup>17</sup> Then the Lord replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. <sup>20</sup> 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."

**Mark 1:21-28**

<sup>21</sup> They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup> They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup> Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup> and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." <sup>25</sup> But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" <sup>26</sup> And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup> They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." <sup>28</sup> At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

## **Meditation**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

How do we know what is true and what is not?

What is conspiracy theory and what is real?

What is fact and what is fiction?

In other words, how do we know who and what to believe in a world dominated by social media, extremism and not a small number of people who try to scare us into thinking as they do?

Last week, some people found a flyer in their mailboxes titled “Facts not Fear” and claimed to expose the truth of COVID-19. An infectious disease expert has said the flyer is simply more junk mail. The specialist addressed some of the claims the flyer makes, and outlined the problem that injecting a little bit of truth into myth gives the myth some credibility, and people will believe it, even though it isn’t true. The flyer made claims about lockdowns, masks, testing, fatality rates and the prevalence of symptoms that were aimed at discrediting medically, scientifically proven aspects of this deadly virus that is claiming lives and has changed the world. While the flyer is trying to say authorities are scaring people unnecessarily, in reality, the claims within its information will make things worse if believed. It fuels the fire of anti-maskers and anti-lockdown groups and creates a dangerous situation.

So how do we know what to believe?

Sometimes it can be difficult to know the difference between true and false, especially when that which is false can look so similar to what is true. It can mimic truth by twisting things to make us think it is the right answer.

Bruce and I love to watch documentaries on marine archaeology, and sometimes not so much on archaeology, but on people’s quests to solve puzzles, unwrap mysteries, and finally find an answer to some of history’s greatest questions. “The Curse of the Bermuda Triangle” is one of my favourites. Some of the theories are amusing, some are thought-provoking, and some, well I wonder what people have eaten for breakfast in the morning to come up with that line of thought. One of the shows we watch with great interest is “Drain the Oceans.” We have that one set to record every episode. We have seen researchers turn up historical evidence of things like the beginnings of the Roman Empire, the sinking of the Titanic, and the Revolutionary War. It’s quite fascinating. Every now and then they do an episode about a long- unanswered question. Last week we watched as they tried to finally determine whether the Loch Ness Monster is real. There was some interesting historical reality shared, but when it came to proving or disproving the existence of Nessie, well, they couldn’t do either. They showed famous footage and photos of sightings of the creature, but of course you can make of them anything you want them to be. As we watched I looked at Bruce as said, “they all look like waves to me.” I couldn’t see any monster-like qualities to the images. Maybe I’m just cynical about the existence of mythological creatures. If they do exist, there are a few I’d rather not meet.

The problem with things that are unprovable is just that: they’re unprovable. We can believe anything we want about them. Is Nessie a myth? A whale adapted to fresh water? A dinosaur? A series of rolling waves bouncing off the cliffs? What I see as a wave, someone else

will see as sea serpent breaching the surface. But whether Nessie is real or not really doesn't have a profound impact on my life. It's an interesting story with some interesting theories, but really doesn't change anything for me.

Those who try to alter things that do make an impact on people's lives, who twist falsehoods to make them look like truths, who claim to have truth when they only want power, that's a whole different situation. The Bible consistently warns about false prophets. Some people listen to them, others do not. Some do not know who is credible and who is not. Some question Jesus and his authority as to whether it is real or not. But the Bible is clear about who is a true prophet of God, and who is truly the Son of God.

A professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, Dr. Schifferdecker, in St. Paul, MN tells a story about her time teaching at a seminary in Ethiopia.

*"How can you tell a true prophet from a false prophet?"*

*Spending my sabbatical year teaching at the Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, I encountered questions that I've never encountered in an American seminary classroom. Prophets? In my experience, prophets are people like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel — strange, charismatic figures whose words continue to inspire and convict us, but who are safely confined to the biblical era. We might speak of exceptional people like Martin Luther King, Jr. as prophets, but such people are few and far between.*

*But for my Ethiopian students, the question was a real and urgent one. There are many people who claim to be prophets in the Ethiopian churches, and those around them need to know whether they are trustworthy or not.*

*One student, a middle-aged, wise pastor, said that when he was young, a self-proclaimed prophet told him and a certain young woman that God wanted them to marry one another and that if they didn't, they would die. "We looked at each other," he went on, "and we said, 'No, we're not going to get married.' We married other people and both of us are still alive." The whole class laughed.<sup>1</sup>*

How can you tell a true prophet from a false one? The question was a pressing one for the people in the time of Deuteronomy. They are worried because they don't know who will take up Moses place when the great prophet dies. Moses reassures them God will raise up another from among them, but that doesn't seem to ease their anxiety. It has been made abundantly clear they are not to consult mediums and such, as do the nations around them. They are only to listen to the words of God as uttered by God's own prophet. So how will they know who will be speaking for God? This wasn't a question about the coming Messiah and the end of the age. This was about the here and now, in the day to day challenges of life. This was about wanting to listen to the right voice. Who is speaking for God?

Professor Schifferdecker brings the question into today's context. "Perhaps the question is as relevant for us as it was for those ancient Israelites and for my present-day Ethiopian

---

<sup>1</sup> Workingpreacher.org... Commentary on Deuteronomy 18:15-20 February 1, 2015. Written by Kathryn M. Schifferdecker: Professor and Elva B. Lovell Chair of Old Testament, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minn.

students. Who speaks for God? There are lots of people who claim to speak for God today: prosperity preachers, self-help gurus, radio and TV preachers, religious bloggers galore, and even [the] working preacher, who gets up Sunday after Sunday to proclaim God's Word in [his or her] particular time and place."<sup>2</sup>

There are two obvious ways to tell if someone is a false prophet. The first, and clearest, is if the person speaks in the name of a god or gods other than the one true God. If one is not speaking God's words, one is not speaking for God. The second, and this one is trickier, is that anyone speaking a prophecy that does not come true is not a true prophet of God. The issue with this one is that we can't see the future, so we don't know if the words are spoken truth until after the fact. How can we know if a prophecy is going to come into reality and therefore we will know if the one speaking is a true prophet?

The professor I quoted earlier outlines a few biblical ways in which we know if a prophet is true or false. First, throughout the bible, true prophets do not seek to be prophets. Protests and excuses are made for why each one is not able to do the job. Moses claimed he had a speech impediment. Jeremiah claimed he was too young. Jonah tried to escape. Elijah ran away. These great voices for the Lord did not want to do it, but they were compelled to do it because God had chosen them. They could not avoid God's call.

Second, true prophets do not seek glory or riches. They do not seek to prosper from God's call on their lives. They are not looking to turn a profit from their ministry. They do not accept money or gifts for performing miraculous healings, and sometimes put their dignity aside to engage in rather strange behaviours in order to receive the message, and to effectively communicate it to the people.

Third, true prophets speak God's words, not their own. Sometimes those words are pretty uncomfortable to speak, let alone hear. They often pronounce a word of judgement on their own people. Sometimes those words are followed up with a word or two of encouragement and hope, but the harsh word always comes first. God's words take priority over those of the prophet.

Fourth, true prophets speak new words into new situations. They do not hold onto the past but look toward what God is still to do. However, their words are always consistent with what we know about God already, from Scripture. If their words contradict what God has said or done before, those words are suspect.

Finally, true prophets are known by their fruitfulness. "Does the prophet (or preacher) lead others to be disciples of Jesus or of themselves? Does his or her preaching lead to repentance and transformation or to complacency and self-absorption?"<sup>3</sup> Said another way, who is the prophet about – God and God's people, or him or herself?<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes it is difficult to spot a false prophet. But Moses assured the people God would raise another and they would be able to put their trust in that new prophet. God did raise another, and another, and another. Finally, God raise One who was quite different from all those before

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> The two ways to recognize a false prophet and the five points above are from Professor Schifferdecker's work, referenced in note 1. The explanations are adapted into my own words for my context.

him, and had authority unlike any other. When Jesus taught in the synagogue, there was a power to his teaching that had not been experienced before. When he healed, it was a healing unlike any other because it was always healing that came through faith first. When he exercised demons, it was totally unique, because even the demons knew they were outmatched. They could not go against this One. They had to obey. It is clear in today's Gospel story that this One, this teacher, this healer, was unique. *They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."* (Mk 1:27)

When we hear the words of the prophets throughout the Old Testament, we know we are encountering the real deal because we have the Scriptures to give credibility to Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Elijah, and all those who were called by God to speak his word to the world. But when we hear Jesus speak, we are hearing a voice unlike any that has come before. His word is not only God-given, but it is the very voice of God.

It is a voice that heals, a voice that saves.

It is a voice that teaches, a voice that comforts.

It is the voice of God speaking from the heart of God.

It is Jesus, the Son of God, who has authority unlike any other, and who is as true as truth can possibly be.

How can we know if someone is truly speaking God's word? Measure it against the Scriptures.

Does it uphold or contradict what the Bible teaches?

Does it heal or hurt God's people?

Does it come to us with the authority of the Holy Spirit, or is it merely human?

If it is truly God's word, it is spoken with the Spirit of Christ to make it God's truth. We always ought to ask God to help us know which word we should heed, and what we should dismiss. His Spirit will help us discern truth from falsehood. And remember, Christ's word, spoken through the Scriptures, is always God's word. It is always truth. Amen.