Listening to the Prophet Like Moses

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First Reading: Deut 18:15-20

You can tell someone isn’t listening when they roll their eyes, look away, or worse, plug their ears. We often hear talk of “listening skills” and personal empathy, our responsibility to be open to what other people have to say, but too frequently we find ourselves avoiding listening to what we really need to hear. Change is hard and heeding the voice of change is the first step down the hard road. But can you imagine if you heard God speak to you in an audible voice and you turned him down, asking him to stop talking? That’s exactly what his people did long ago.

Moses Gives a Speech

Our Sunday’s first reading comes from Deuteronomy, which takes the form of a long speech by Moses at the border of the Promised Land. “Deutero” means “second,” and “nomos” means law, so Deuteronomy is the “second law.” That is, it reiterates and sometimes expands on laws previously given to the people in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. It is the conclusion of the Torah, the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. In the heart of Moses’ big speech, he offers them a mysterious prophecy. Now normally we think of Moses as a law-giver, but properly speaking, he is a prophet, a person who speaks on God’s behalf. He predicts that God will send a “prophet like me” sometime in the future.

Refusing to Listen

The only reason that the ancient Israelites need a prophet at all is because they refused to listen to God when he spoke to them. If you recall the dramatic giving of the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai in the midst of smoke, thunder, lightening, and trumpet blasts, you might sympathize with the terrified Israelites. After hearing God speak in such an awe-inspiring way, they turn to Moses and ask him to speak on God’s behalf. They say “let not God speak to us, lest we die” (Exod 20:19 RSV). The Israelites refuse to listen to God directly because of their fear, but at least they are willing to listen to his messenger.
A Prophet Prophesies a Prophet

While listening to Moses’ final speech, their prophet prophesies another prophet. Our reading begins with his prediction: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren” (Deut 18:15 RSV). Moses is a unique prophet in Israel’s history, since through him God offers to speak to his people, lead them out of slavery, give them a law, and give them an official way to worship him (with a priesthood and tabernacle). Moses is the turning point of the Old Testament, when God’s people move from being a nomadic family clan to being a real nation, united under law. Moses is in some sense a nation builder, the person around whom the people assemble, the mediator of God’s covenant with his people. For Moses to prophesy a new “prophet like me,” a “new Moses,” is a mind-bending thought. How could God reconstitute his people around a new prophet? How could anyone fill Moses’ shoes?

A New Moses

And yet when Jesus appears in the Galilean back-country, he looks surprisingly like Moses. He gathers twelve men around himself (like the twelve tribes). He spends 40 days fasting and praying in the wilderness, like Moses’ 40 years in Midian. He inaugurates his ministry at the Jordan River, the entry point to the Promised Land. He seems to be launching a New Exodus, not from the physical slavery of Egypt in Moses’ era, but from the “spiritual Egypt” of slavery to sin. Not only that, but he goes up on a mountain (Matt 5:1) to deliver the Sermon on the Mount, a new law, the first of Jesus’ five discourses in Matthew’s Gospel, like Moses’ five books. And of course, Jesus is “the mediator of a new covenant” (Heb 12:24), not ratified with animal sacrifices, but with the supreme sacrifice of himself, the spotless Lamb of God. The parallels go on and on.

New Testament Perspectives

When John the Baptist is found baptizing people, some ask him “Are you the Prophet?” (John 1:21), referring back to our passage in Deut 18:15. He says that he is not, but their question reveals that the Prophet is someone people are looking for. In fact, when Philip tells his brother about Jesus, he says “we have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote,” (Joh 1:45 RSV), meaning that Jesus is the Prophet like Moses. Again, in Acts, St. Peter preaches to the crowds that Jesus is this Prophet and he quotes Deuteronomy 18 as backup (Acts 3:22-23). St. Stephen too, when giving his final defense before the Sanhedrin cites Deuteronomy 18
and argues that Jesus is the one who fulfills the prophecy (Acts 7:37): Jesus is the one whom God has appointed as the New Moses.

**Listening to the New Moses**

Ah, but the real difficulty lies not identifying the New Moses, but in listening to what he has to say. In our media-saturated culture, we so often listen to music or radio or podcasts, watch television or movies, read articles online or take in a new book via Kindle. Perhaps we hope to be helped, entertained, relieved, or informed by all these things, but what if we have opportunity to listen to the Creator of the universe himself, the One who made us and knows how to save us? That’s where we find ourselves dealing with ourselves. How do we have time to listen to the New Moses when we have so many other things to listen to? We might find ourselves in the shoes of the ancient Israelites asking Moses to stop God from talking out of fear. Yet it is not the bombastic special effects of Mt. Sinai that are truly frightening, but the call of God which offers everything and yet demands everything. The voice of the Savior who says, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt 16:24 RSV). When that call reaches us deep inside, we could turn away and look for something pleasant to listen to or we can allow it to hit home, and embark on that New Exodus path, laden with a cross, which turns out to be the lightest yoke of all.