

May 20, 2018

Prophets and Priests

Leviticus 8:1-10; Numbers 11:26-30

Pentecost, Lydia Walter's Confirmation, Music Sunday

We continue our walk through the Exodus story with a reading from Leviticus 8, verses 1-10:

8 *The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ²Take Aaron and his sons with him, the vestments, the anointing-oil, the bull of sin-offering, the two rams, and the basket of unleavened bread; ³and assemble the whole congregation at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁴And Moses did as the Lord commanded him. When the congregation was assembled at the entrance of the tent of meeting, ⁵Moses said to the congregation, 'This is what the Lord has commanded to be done.'*

⁶Then Moses brought Aaron and his sons forward, and washed them with water. ⁷He put the tunic on him, fastened the sash around him, clothed him with the robe, and put the ephod on him. He then put the decorated band of the ephod around him, tying the ephod to him with it. ⁸He placed the breastpiece on him, and in the breastpiece he put the Urim and the Thummim. ⁹And he set the turban on his head, and on the turban, in front, he set the golden ornament, the holy crown, as the Lord commanded Moses. ¹⁰Then Moses took the anointing-oil and anointed the tabernacle and all that was in it, and consecrated them.

So one of the things that happened during the Exodus – while the people of Israel were in the desert, preparing to enter the Promised Land – was the establishment of religious leaders. As you just heard, Moses' brother Aaron and his sons were designated priests over Israel for all time, a hereditary task. In fact, Aaron's whole tribe – the tribe of Levi – was designated for a religious calling. The Israelites didn't even have their own land, but they had a tent church and now they had leaders for it.

The word "priest" sounds pretty impressive. A priest is one who represents the people the God, serves as an intermediary between God and worshiper, and that certainly is an important thing. But the truth is, most of what priests did was less impressively spiritual. Their true function basically was to keep the religion running. The priests were assigned the task of memorizing all the thousands of details for doing worship by animal sacrifice: which animal on which day and for which type of sacrifice, how to kill the animal, what to do with all the different parts, what to do with the blood, and so on. They had to learn these rules for daily sacrifice and for special festivals, and then see that they were followed to a T. Meanwhile, the Levites, sort of mid-level priests, were given the task of caring for the temple furniture and drapes, providing music for worship, serving as gatekeepers, and transporting the tent shrine when necessary. All of which is pretty mundane stuff. Requiring specialized training, to be sure, but pretty ordinary.

Now we United Methodists don't use the word "priest," that much. That went out for most Protestants back in the Reformation. We say "pastor" or "elder" or something. And we don't usually describe our role as "representing the people to God." That feels a little

presumptuous. But when I look at my job and compare it to the different types of religious leader in the Bible, “priest” is the one that fits best. As with the sons of Aaron, my basic task is to keep the religion running, keep the institution functioning: by making sure that we have worship services on schedule – both the weekly ones and the special festivals – see that Communion is done correctly, with the right words by the right personnel, oversee the care of the church furniture and drapes and other facilities, raise money. In terms of actual time spent, my role most weeks is primarily managerial. There’s nothing wrong with that; these tasks need to be done, I guess. But it doesn’t always feel all that spiritual.

Fortunately, the Exodus story describes another sort of religious leader: the prophet. If the priest is the one who represents the people to God, then the prophet is the one who delivers the message of God to the people. In the Exodus there are a few people called prophets: Moses’ sister Miriam, Balaam the Midianite, but the one designated prophet above all others is Moses himself. But prophets are different from priests, as we discover in this story.

We read now from Numbers, chapter 11, verses 26-30:

26Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. 27And a young man ran and told Moses, ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.’ 28And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, ‘My lord Moses, stop them!’ 29But Moses said to him, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!’ 30And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Now there are a lot of differences between priests and prophets, but I just want to point out one today. The prophet is not somebody special. There are no educational standards, no special training, and no family connections required. In the Hebrew Bible we see people of all sorts being called by God as prophets and sent out to deliver God’s message: farmers, shepherds, women, children and teenagers, and social outcasts. Occasionally, even a priest will get the call, but that’s the exception.

That means that everyone in this room is a potential prophet, a person to whom God entrusts a message for the community. You don’t have to have a seminary education. The only requirements for being a prophet are the willingness to listen to God and the courage to speak out what God has revealed. It could be anyone, even a pastor, but don’t count on it. It could be you.

This is why what we are doing this morning in the second service is so important. One of our young adults, Lydia Walter, has examined scripture for herself and has chosen to confirm her faith. She was accepted into the family of God by her birth and baptism, and at her baptism, adopted into this family. Today she adopts God back, and adopts this church as her own. She has decided to relate to God for herself, not second-hand, through others. She is opening herself up to listen to God. And to those who listen, God will speak.

As Moses put it, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!”