

# Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today our first reading came from the book of Deuteronomy, which is the last book of the Torah. And Deuteronomy is a very special book, although it can be a little hard to understand sometimes. But we know this book and its stories are very important to God, because Jesus quotes Deuteronomy more than he quotes any other part of scripture, and it's by far the book that Paul and his contemporaries reference the most often. So let's see what treasures it has for us today.

To put our reading in context, at this time in our history, the people of God were wandering. It's a beautiful fact of the English language that wandering sounds so much like wondering. They were wandering and wondering, between a known and painful past in Egypt, and an uncertain but maybe beautiful future in Canaan, the Promised Land. And in between pain and the promised land was the desert.

The desert is a dangerous place. The winds are always shifting, and the dunes of sand are always changing. It never quite looks the same. There is nothing to eat, or drink, and almost nothing grows there.

According to the wisdom of this world, there is no reason to enter a desert at all. It's interesting, though. That's where God so often seems to meet God's people. Only once they are far away from easy lives and

comfortable answers.

When the Israelites moved through their desert, Moses was their guide. Their prophet. Moses, with his sister Miriam, his brother Aaron, and his wife Tziporah, led the people out of Egypt. He led them for many, many, many years. Over the years, Miriam died, and Tziporah died, and Aaron died, but Moses kept going. Kept leading. Kept bringing down wisdom from holy mountains. And forty years in, the people grew anxious. You can probably sense some of that anxiety in our text today. You can practically hear them saying, “Moses, you’re getting on in years. We’re not there yet, how are we going to get there without you?”

In comes Deuteronomy, the love letter, given from Moses to the Israelites to soothe their anxiety about the future of the people of God. Moses said all these things in the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month: “Do you remember what you said to me at Mount Horeb? (If you forgot, that’s the place where I brought you the Ten Commandments, and it’s also the place that you all made that golden calf to worship...). I was on the mountain, in the fire, and I heard the voice of God, and I brought you God’s message. And then you said, ‘Who else is there on the planet who has heard the voice of the living God and lived? Only you. If any of us went into that fire, we would die. But you, Moses, you have walked on God’s mountain and spent time in God’s fire. You’re the only one we can trust to be our prophet.

Everything that the Lord our God tells you, we will listen, and do it.”<sup>1</sup> It’s

funny. We happen to know, with the benefit of hindsight, that our ancestors did not, in fact, listen to everything Moses told them. In fact they almost always did the opposite of what Moses told them – don't build idols, they built an idol. Don't hoard manna, they hoarded manna. It's hard to trust a prophet of the Lord, just like it's hard to follow God into the desert. There's no earthly reason to trust a prophet because following the will of God does not lead earthly rewards. But, in time, the people came to trust Moses. Which is why it was so hard for them to imagine going on without him, to imagine the promised land without him.

And so Moses continued and we get our passage today. Moses said, "One day, the Lord your God will raise up another prophet, someone like me, from among you. You should listen to them. Remember, you said that you wanted to trust the people who would go close to the fire and can hear the voice of the living God and live. And God said, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you. I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak, I will hold accountable."

What words does God put in the mouths of prophets? I think they're words like, "I love you" and "do better." Words that prickle the strong and bring liberation to the powerless. Words like "all lives matter is missing the point of black lives matter." Words like "queer people are made in the image of God," and "gender-affirming care is a holy act."

The Torah tells us that a prophet is someone who comes close to holy fire

in the isolation of God's holy mountain, who hears the words of the living God, and who lives to talk about it. People, I tell you that these prophets are still here, and many of them are in this room.

There are some people in this world who, because of the color of their skin, or who their souls love, or how gender blossoms within them, are born into the holy fire. Some people in this world, by the very nature of their being, are able to hear the voice of God very loudly and very clearly on that holy mountain.

I wasn't sure if I should say this next part but I'm going to. You know, when I am outside the walls of this church and I meet a straight person and they find out I am a queer minister, I am always asked the same question. This has happened to me dozens of times. Everyone says the same thing. They ask, "Man, how was it growing up queer and Christian?" And then before I can answer, they say, "It must have been awful. You must have hated yourself."

There's this baseline assumption that what God has given me as a gift must really be a burden. And sure, my queer identity makes it hard to exist in this world but it is actually a profound gift, one I would never trade away. Since I was a child I have seen very clearly the ways this world is so, so far from the world God wants for us. I have never been tricked into thinking my church is perfect, my way of living is perfect, that I could ever dream to become perfect! Many straight people, many white people, many cis people who need to learn that lesson in order to come close to

the kingdom of God, will learn it painfully, over time, as they approach God's holy fire little by little, and the veil of false power, false safety and false life is slowly burned away. But queer people... we were born in that fire. People of color, you were born in that fire.

My dear people, if you have an identity born of fire, that is no cross to bear. That is a great gift of God, the gift given to Moses and all the prophets after him. The gift of knowing truth. The gift of discerning unclean spirits. The gift of seeing sin for what it is, plain and simple, and how it separates us from the abundant life and everlasting love that God has laid out for us.

And if you are not a person born of that fire – if you are a person whose sexuality fits comfortably with in the structures of this world, or someone with a race or gender that can take on worldly power or worldly safety very easily – you, my friends, have the struggle of the Israelites. You will have the struggle of witnessing prophets and worrying whether they are false. You will receive prophecy and feel uncomfortable. You will hear reparations and think, “Haven't I done enough?” You will hear “we need to do more” and wonder, “What else is there?” You will hear criticism from the marginalized, you will hear anger from the outcasts, God will send you the people crying-out and the people bearing prophecy and it is your job to listen.

In this passage God does not tell us to worry about whether a prophet is false, whether a prophet who claims to speak for God is actually

speaking for themselves. This passage from Deuteronomy specifically tells us to not worry about it. False prophets will be dealt with, by God. They will lose power, they will die out. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. The prophets who bear the word of our God will sit in these pews and walk in those streets and they will deliver the word and we must listen.

Dear people, I say to you: this day, Reconciling in Christ Sunday, is not just about repeating the everyday call of our church: that diversity is beautiful, that queer people are beloved in the eyes of god, that all are welcome in the assembly of god. It's about all that and *also* it's about listening to the prophets God has sent into our assembly from the fire. It is about being uncomfortable and feeling confused and having to wrestle but still receiving the word of the living, breathing God, incarnate in flesh all around us. It is about unlocking our hearts, being open to change, living in repentance, humility, and grace, tearing down those golden idols that we inevitably will build up, loving without condition, working for a justice that rolls down like the waters, and actively seeking to reconcile our broken world to God's vision of the kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is all around us. The kingdom of heaven is near.