

Epiphany 4



February 2, 2003

February 2 is the festival of The Presentation of our Lord; many Lutheran congregations will observe it on this Sunday rather than the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany.

Prayer of the Day

O God, you know that we cannot withstand the dangers which surround us. Strengthen us in body and spirit so that, with your help, we may be able to overcome the weakness that our sin has brought upon us; through Jesus Christ, your Son our Lord. Amen

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

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

15. a prophet like me: Moses is speaking. "like me" could mean anything from "an Israelite *like me*," to "an inspired prophet *like me*." Luke quotes this passage in Acts 3:2 and 7:37; Deuteronomy 34:10 declares that the prophet like Moses has not yet arisen (perhaps sixth century b.c.). By putting this reading in context with Mark 1:21-28 Mark identifies Jesus as the prophet like Moses, than whom he is greater; also Hebrews 3:3.

16. If I hear the voice of the LORD...or ever again see this fire, I will die: A reference back to Deuteronomy 5:25: the Israelites have Moses go to hear Yahweh alone, so they will not be in danger of dying when they hear Yahweh's voice.

17. They are right in what they have said: Deuteronomy 5:28: Yahweh agreed with the people. So, Moses became an intermediary between Yahweh and the Israelites, with Yahweh's concurrence. This introduces Yahweh's declaration that he will provide prophets who will speak what he commands them.

19. the words that the prophet shall speak in my name: And how shall we know that the words the prophet is speaking are truly the words of God? "You may say to yourself, 'How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?' If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it" (Deuteronomy 18:22). According to Robert Boyle the purpose of an hypothesis in science, should be: "That it enable a skilful Naturalist to foretell future Phenomena by their Congruity or Incongruity to it; and especially the Events of such Experiments as are aptly devised to Examine it; as Things that ought or ought not to be Consequent to it." [1] In other words the test of good prophecy and good science is the same: does what it promises take place?

Psalms 111

{1} Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. {2} Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them. {3} Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. {4} He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful. {5} He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. {6} He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. {7} The works of his hands are

faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. {8} They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. {9} He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name. {10} The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

The Psalm is an acrostic poem, with each half-verse beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. "...the psalm strings together stereotyped statements and maxims. The singer chooses examples from the tradition of conventional sayings." [2] "The hymnic praise of the singer is at the same time thanksgiving and confession." [3]

1-4: The Psalmist praises God because of his dealings with his people.

5-6: Specific works of Yahweh are noted: food, the covenant, the heritage of the nations.

7-9: The law is to be kept faithfully.

9. *holy and awesome is his name*: This is in contrast with the description in verse 4: "the Lord is gracious and merciful." The psalmist "recognizes the gift of the divine grace and the obligatory nature of the demand made by his holy will as the two inseparable aspects of the God who is at once unapproachable and near.... the inscrutable greatness of the God whose praise he wishes to proclaim." [3a] Yahweh's name is Yahweh.

10: "In v. 10a a wisdom saying [Proverbs 9:10] is taken up which corresponds to the actual endeavor of the psalmist to lead from formalism, traditionalism, and dogmatism to a living encounter with the God of Israel. In the 'fear of Yahweh' the human being becomes aware of the reality of God. In many cases—and so in Ps. 111:10—'fear of Yahweh' denotes obedience to the divine will." [4]

His praise endures forever: "The conclusion of the psalm is formed by a hymnic half-verse, as in Ps. 15:5." [5]

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

{1} Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. {2} Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; {3} but anyone who loves God is known by him. {4} Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." {5} Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords-- {6} yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. {7} It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. {8} "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. {9} But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. {10} For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? {11} So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. {12} But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. {13} Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

1. *food sacrificed to idols*: Christian Jews could not eat meat that had been prepared by pagan butchers because, in the preparation, it had been sacrificed in honor of pagan gods. According to the Jerusalem agreement (Acts 15:29) Gentile Christians were supposed to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols. Christians in Thyatira and Pergammum were indicted for eating such meat (Revelation 2:14, 20).

4. *we know that "no idol in the world really exists"*: Enlightened Gentile Christians also knew that idols had no real existence, so meat could not be sacrificed to them, and there was no religious reason for not eating it. On the other hand, though they knew that no idol had real existence (see Isaiah 44:8ff; 45:5ff.), for Christian Jews the question was not the reality of idols, but the appearance of idolatrous behavior by some Christians. It was a problem that continued to trouble the early church until the church was primarily Gentile and butchers no longer sacrificed to pagan gods.

7-13. *It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge*: Christian Jews, who had resisted pagan influences continued to "think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled." So Paul counseled concern for the weak, and committed himself to such a course: "if

food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall."

Two principles are in conflict here. First, since the gods of the pagans do not exist, activities their worshippers participate in as religious exercises have no religious meaning to Christians and can be engaged in for non-religious reasons. Second, if by insisting on our freedom to do what we want in such cases, we cause Christians who are not as sophisticated as we are to lose faith, then we sin against our brothers and sisters in Christ. The resolution? "Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other" (1 Corinthians 10:24). A third aspect must also be remembered and considered. Those who were concerned with this matter were in the minority, and whatever they did did not effect those of the public for whom it was not an issue. We may need to be reminded that we are, even now, a minority, and should be concerned with harmony among believers rather than the imposition of our enlightened morality on others, lest our discord be the cause of spiritual damage to others.

Mark 1:21-28

{21} They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. {22} They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. {23} Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, {24} 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." {25} But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" {26} And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. {27} 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." {28} At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

21. They went to Capernaum: According to Matthew 4:13 (Mark 2:1), Jesus made his home in Capernaum. In Luke 4:23 Jesus points to the desire of the people of Nazareth to share in the same benefits as Capernaum did. On the other hand, in Matthew 11:23 Jesus prophesies a dismal end for Capernaum.

22. he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes: The teaching of the scribes was to quote the authorities of the past, to arrange them according to their different ideas, and to leave a decision between them up in the air. One can view this kind of teaching in the Mishneh. The son of a carpenter would be expected to keep his place and not speak in public, so Jesus behavior surprises and shocks those who were present.

23. a man with an unclean spirit: In Mark it is the unclean spirits, demons and Gentiles who recognize who Jesus is.

24. the Holy One of God: This phrase is used only here, in Luke 4:34, the parallel to this passage, and in John 6:69 where Peter, speaking for the disciples, says, "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." In Psalm 106:16 Aaron is called "the holy one of the LORD." Otherwise, the phrase "the Holy One of Israel" is a fairly frequent designation for Yahweh. The demons acknowledge Jesus power over them and invoke his identity for protection.

25. Jesus does not hurt the demons, but he does silence them and expels them from their host.

27: Again those who are present are astonished by his authority over unclean spirits.

What is this? ...He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him: "Who then is this that even the wind and sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41).

Reflection

Jesus came speaking with authority, and with authority he spoke on behalf of the stranger, the powerless, the oppressed. Though his teachings contradicted the traditions of his people, even demons and Gentiles recognized him for who he was. Prophets speak with the authority of God. Often what they say is surprising and disconcerting. Often the words of prophets require us to surrender desirable positions and principles, to relinquish comfortable opinions and points of view. They may even require us to give way when we are right and know it.

For Christians it is not being right that counts. What is important is our love and concern for others, especially others who do not share our values and perspectives. God deals graciously with us; we are to

be gracious toward others, even to the extent of loving our enemies (Matthew 5:55; Luke 6:27, 35).

Hymns [6]

With One Voice (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement* 1991 (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).

E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson; G=Gospel

90 E Songs of
299 D Dear
Christians,
237 I O God of Light
818s P Tell Out, My

504 II O God, My Faithful
493 G Hope of the
270, 802s, 370, 509

Prayers of the People [7]

A: Let us pray for those who delight in the law of the Lord, and for all people according to their needs.

A: We pray for the whole church. May patriarchs of the East and bishops of the West, pastors and ministers, deacons and all who do good works, find a place in the procession of the prophets who speak faithfully in God's name. Lord, in your mercy. C: Hear our prayer.

A: We pray for the hungry. May they be fed and live to give thanks to the one God and the one Lord, Jesus Christ. Lord, in your mercy. C: Hear our prayer.

A: We pray for those who are appointed to make moral judgments. Grant them divine insight to make just and beneficial decisions. Lord in your mercy. C: Hear our prayer.

A: We pray for the sick and all in any need. May your authority, which overwhelms the unclean spirits, also overcome all hurt. (We remember especially...). Lord, in your mercy. C: Hear our prayer.

A: We give thanks for Moses and the goodly fellowship of the prophets, and for Paul and the glorious company of the apostles. May their words and teaching guide us through life. In death receive us with them in to the heavenly kingdom. Lord, in your mercy. C: Hear our prayer.

P: Into your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Or[8]

Presider or deacon

In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, let us pray for all who need the cleansing power of the Holy One of God.

Deacon or other leader

For the church and all who teach the truth of God.

For prophets in every land who rebuke the spirits of greed and violence, oppression and despair.

For those burdened by anguish or illness, and for those who care for them with love and healing.

For married couples and all companions growing together in selfless love.

For catechumens experiencing the liberation of the spirit. For the dead in the presence of God's holy power.

For ourselves and all those we love.

Presider

God our Teacher, speaking with holy authority, liberating us from the forces of evil, hear the prayers we offer this day and give us courage as we proclaim your truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Notes

[1] Quoted by R.S. Westfall, *The construction of modern science*. New York: Wiley and Sons; 1971, p. 115.

[2] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989, p. 356.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 357.

[3a] Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962, p. 701.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 359.

[5] *Loc. cit.*

[6] <http://www.worship.ca/text/wpch0203.txt>

[7] "Lessons & Prayers," Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. Volume 2, Number 1, January 30, 1994.

[8] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>