

January 31, 2021, the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

The Next Voice You Hear

**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.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

Rome has its colosseum; Paris has its Eiffel Tower; London has its Tower Bridge; and Pittsburgh has its Civic Arena – but no not anymore. As the city out west arose from the smoke many new bright ideas immersed. One of them was to build a grand public edifice that would serve as a theater, concert hall, sports stadium, and convention center. On top of that it should have a retractable roof so spectators could sit under the stars, in one of the rainiest places in America, and enjoy many events. In 1951 a very similar looking thing landed in Washington D.C. and a robot emerged followed by Michael Rennie wrapped in aluminum foil. He came in peace so they shot him. In my addled impressionable young mind I became convinced the Civic Arena wasn't built but landed and the unusually named local coroner, Cyril Wecht, emerged. Anyway the people out west work very hard to keep from being seen as stodgy east coasters so they tore the Civic Arena down a few years ago. It's now a parking lot. Thank goodness I actually witness some of the demolition or I might think Dr. Wecht had taken off in it to return to his home planet.

A common feature of 1950's science fiction was the worldwide broadcast from the aliens who commandeered our mass media outlets to announce, “The next voice you hear.” Messages from these aliens varied depending on just how much animosity was going on between Russian and the United States – some things never seem to change. Words of peace vs words of invasion

were commonly delivered to radio and tv stations all at once in many different languages. You could tell it was worldwide because the news readers were shown in front of the Eiffel Tower, Tower Bridge, and Mount Fuji. If aliens could do that, why can't God? What would you think if your viewing pleasure was interrupted and the next voice you heard was the voice of God?

When a prophet of Old Testament vintage wanted to command worldwide attention the message would begin, THE WORD OF THE LORD. That would indicate the prophet was acting as a radio speaking only what God said. If you tune in to many broadcasts of the Christian TV and Radio ilk there is often a serious attempt to make you think the program comes straight from God's mouth to your ears and eyes. The trouble of course is that there are so many people attempting to be *the next voice you hear* that it's hard to distinguish what anyone is saying, and the messages are often contradictory or just slightly overlapping. You could try to draw a venn diagram encircling each message and figuring out where they overlap. You could pick out one and exclude all others. I am told that great consternation would result if Jesus returned arriving in Salt Lake City.

Perhaps God is speaking through a prophet but who might it be? Well there are some tests. Does it coincide with what the tradition embraced as a message from God? In other words is it Biblical. That assumes that God has nothing new to say to us after two thousand years. In what amounts to a plug for us Presbyterians we think that if each person brings what they think is a message from God to a meeting where everyone compares notes and those who are in most agreement about the content of that message vote the result is a closer approximation than any one person can make alone.

I once complained to a professor that Paul of Tarsus made claims about the meaning of scripture that we aren't allowed to make. The reply was, "He was Paul; you're not." Which prophet do we accept when it seems God is not going to commandeer the internet and proclaim a world-wide message? Simple popularity is not enough because we all want to believe what is comfortable to us. Prayerful consideration and consistency of message, even if it pushes beyond the established words is the best we can do.

God seems to be a great deal more subtle now than in the past. Maybe that's because the message has gotten through and while we resist it we know the Truth and as John wrote, "you shall know the Truth and the Truth shall set you free."

*Closing Prayer:* Living God, in Christ you make all things new. Transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.