

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
January 29, 2012
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Confirmation Sunday-Spirits, Truth and Love,
Deuteronomy 18:15-20, 1 John 1: 1-21, Mark 1:21-28

The political primary season has begun in earnest for the Republican Party, and a wild time it has been. Who will be the candidate to run against President Obama? One thing I have noticed in 64 years of life is that in any of these campaigns the candidates of all parties speak a ton of words and make a plethora of promises. As the electorate, discerning whether or not there is truth and substance to what is said can be tough work. We also wonder about the spirit in which things are said. As I John 4 tells us, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; many false prophets have gone out into the world." We may want to cry out for a prophet from God to come to help us discern the will of God, the genuineness of the words spoken and the spirit of the candidates as we prepare to vote. Until one shows up, we can pray for God's Spirit to guide us in the truth for today and for the sake of future generations.

Speaking of future generations, today, we will receive our confirmation class into the church. We have two students, Niki Stratton and Sarah Brooksmith. I am concerned for their future in our political world and in the challenges they will face to their Christian faith. I pray we have equipped them in the faith to discern the truth and the spirit of those they will follow in all aspects of their lives. This authenticity of leadership is not a new concern, but has been one for endless generations.

One set of leaders of the Biblical world who spoke to generations past and still speak to us today with authenticity are the Biblical prophets of God. Their calling was to help the people of God discern the will of God. They were to speak the truth of God, and bring the Spirit of God to the people. As we heard in the Old Testament Lesson, 3500 years ago, the Hebrews had the same desire for a prophet from God. They needed someone to speak God's truthful and guiding word to them about their religious and political lives which were inseparable. If the truth be known, so are ours. The Hebrews were about to enter the Promised Land, but this land contained well-armed tribes who practiced sinful ways of life that could have easily lured people away from God. Moses, who was God's prophet to the Hebrews, was still there to teach them, but he would not be going into the Promised Land. So, God spoke through Moses about this problem. God told them that there would be other prophets of Godly spirit who would come to truthfully guide them into and throughout the Promised Land.

A true prophet of God was, and still is a person that the Spirit of God appoints to forth-tell how God wants people to believe and live. God spoke his Word of life and warning directly through the prophet. Too often, we think of a prophet as a foreteller of our future, such as when disasters might strike or the world will end. In a very small part, prophets did this. But, their main assignment was to proclaim to the people God's truthful and spirit-filled message for their daily lives. This is forth-telling. The message of truth from God proclaimed through Moses and later prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others in our Old Testament was, "Love and obey the Lord your God with all you have, show

justice and mercy to one another today, and in the future, and you will live. If you disobey the Lord, by lying, being mean spirited and unloving, your life will be miserable. You will most certainly be destroyed." Sometimes the Word of God spoken in spirit and truth by the prophets made them unpopular with the people, because the people needed to be corrected for their own good and did not like it. The truth of God spoken through the prophet was and still is like a two-edged sword. It brings warning and hope from God. A true prophet was, and still is a person that the Spirit of God appoints to forth-tell how God wants people to believe and live, today.

Being a prophet of God is quite like being a parent, teacher, minister, elder, deacon, political leader or any leader responsible for others well-being. When we are taught the ways of God by God, through prayer, the Bible, classes, faith and life experiences, then we are to tell and show forth God's ways to our children and fellow adults. This is very serious business. It is a matter of life and death, in this world and the next.

One set of prophet-like men I encountered in my life was my Boy Scout leaders when I was 13 years old. Our scout troop went on a winter weekend camp out north of Pittsburgh. We stayed in tents near a cabin along the then frozen over Allegheny River. Well, it looked like it was frozen over. One of our assignments was to haul bags of corncobs through hip deep snow to feed hungry deer. We were given strict orders to stay on the trail and to only cross the river where rope bridges were hung. As in the voice of a prophet of the Lord, they emphatically declared that, "If you try to cross the ice over the river you shall encounter thin ice and fall through and could die!"

After an exhausting trek to deliver our goods, a few of us decided that we could short-cut the trip back by ignoring the prophetic declaration of the leaders, and try crossing the ice filled river to get to the "easier to hike" paved road on the other side. Halfway across the river, just as the prophetic leaders declared, the ice broke and we were hip-deep in freezing water. We knew immediately of the truth of the prophecy of the scout leaders. Our boots were filled with water and felt like lead weights. We helped each other get across, emptied our boots and then hiked a mile and half on the road to the cabin. I was never so cold in all my life. The roaring fire and hot shower at the cabin were the greatest gift God could have ever sent at that time.

The prophetic scout leaders were very angry with us, and in a spirit of love were relieved that we did not drown. They decided that our frozen walk home was punishment enough, so the "further wrath of God" was not needed. They also pointed out that what we had done disrupted the plan for the camp out and disappointed the scout community there. They had spoken the truth of God with honest warning and we did not listen. The shortcut and "easy road" was not the best way. By God's grace we lived with no physical damage to our bodies, but our hearts and minds were changed and we had new respect for these men and the supposedly frozen over river. We could have saved ourselves a lot of grief if we had believed that these prophetic scout leaders were telling God's truth.

This was also a problem in the days of Moses, in the time of Jesus, the early church and is one today. When God's truth is spoken do we listen and obey? May yes, maybe, no. Maybe this is because ancient peoples and we have trouble discerning which prophet is declaring the truth or the will of God? Who is really filled with God's Spirit?

Who is guiding us on the right path? Remember, these could be life and death questions as I found out as a scout. These questions were raised at least three times in the Old Testament. The answer from God is pretty much the same each time. The false prophet's words will not come true and they will soon die. The messages of the true prophets of God will eventually come true. The people will discover the truth as they journey on the path that a true prophet has laid out for them. The message of the true prophets was also consistent with God's teachings from the past. Yet with all this, a great deal of faith in God was still needed until the true prophet's words came true.

So until the message of the true prophet came true, quite often they faced challenges to their authority and authenticity. This was also true of Jesus, who was considered by many as a prophet of God. As the Gospel of Mark tells us, Jesus walked into a synagogue, and began to teach. People were amazed at his teaching. He taught with authority and authenticity from God. He forth-told the truth of God as God's spirit-filled prophet. His teaching rung with truth, consistency, and clarity and dealt with the honest struggles we all face in life. He was living what he taught.

The authority and authenticity of Jesus, and the validity and spirit of his message were tested almost immediately. A man at the synagogue, who had some sort of illness, came up to Jesus, right there in the worship service to challenge Jesus' authority. In those days they called it demon possession, today, we would call it mental illness. Yet, in his illness, the man was sane enough to recognize who Jesus was, and that the source of his authenticity and authority as one sent from God. The demon spoke through the man saying, "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 the Living God!" Even evil or sickness knew what authority and authenticity Jesus carried. He was the real thing. He was God with us. Only the mentally ill man understood this at that time. Jesus told him to be silent, and then he took the action that proved that he was indeed God's spirit-filled prophet who proclaimed God's truth, he healed the man.

Of course, everyone who saw this was amazed and confused. You see, the belief then was that only God could heal someone of this kind of illness or spirit of evil. Yet, the word spread that this man, Jesus, had cast out demons. It did not cause people to suddenly believe in him as Lord and Savior, as we often hope will happen when a miracle occurs. However, it woke people up as to how much authority and authenticity that Jesus had. It had stunned them and left them with more questions than answers.

The observers of this miracle of the healing of the man who had been possessed were asking the same questions of discernment that many of our youth and even some adults ask. Who is this Jesus? What kind of prophet is he? By what power and authority does he heal? If only God can heal in this manner, then does his authority come from God? Is he God with us? Should I give my life to him? Put my heart and faith in him? I mean he actually healed that man. Could he actually touch me that deeply? These are questions we pray our confirmands, Niki and Sarah, and all of us answer in the affirmative.

And so where does the prophetic spirit and truth of God in Jesus Christ touch us today as political leaders, children, teachers, elders, deacons, ministers and parents. The ways are unlimited. Do we sense his discerning presence in our lives, all aspects

of our lives? Has he driven evil out of us? Has he delivered us from a life filled with sin and headed for destruction? Has he healed us of some disease? Can we sense that his Spirit abides in us because we have confessed that Jesus is the Son of God? Do we love each other because he first loved us? Most of all can our youth and the world around us discern that the Spirit and truth of God is in us because we love one another? Because we actually share the spirit, truth and love of God with the rest of humanity for whom Christ also died? Has the prophetic spirit and truth of God in Jesus Christ touched our lives?

If we are still not sure, it is ok to question. It took three years of Jesus' teaching, plus living with him, his crucifixion and resurrection to convince some of the disciples. Who this Jesus is comes to each of us in different ways and in varied times.

If we say yes, then we need to make sure that: the spirit and truth by which we live our lives authentically points back to God in Jesus Christ so that others might confess him as the Son of God and be filled with his love.

In a day when we want to call for a prophet from God to help us discern: The will of God, the genuineness of the words spoken by political candidates, or anyone, and the spirit that lives in them, let us remember that the one who is the Prophet of all prophets always abides within us. It is his truth and Spirit that guides us on the right paths. It is the authority and authenticity from God that heals us of the demons that possess us and replaces the demonic with his love and new life.