

Being Consistent

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"The Bible is timeless because people are consistent." When I heard that this week, I made an audible noise and paused in my work.

I paused because it was so true. I felt that statement in my body, and it transported me to times when I felt like my life was being played out on the pages of scripture with very few modifications.

"The Bible is timeless because people are consistent." was the opening remark in the weekly podcast by Rob Wright, the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta. His podcast "For People" is one of my favorites, and I commend it to you. More than once, while listening to his podcast in my car, I have spontaneously called out, "Preach!"... or "You can say that again!"

When we are given scripture like those appointed for today, it is tempting to skim over them in our individual study or partially tune out during worship because they maybe don't seem current... or relevant to our lives.

We don't often find ourselves worrying about how our food might be a stumbling block to others... or encounter exorcisms, but let's do our best to hang in there and focus on what the Holy Spirit might have for us.

Let's stay close to the scripture, remembering the words we prayed in the collect at the beginning of the service this morning, "And in our own time, grant us your peace." In our time. The story of God continues in us. Here and now. Our lives are not post-scriptural or post-Jesus.

Seeing the link between Moses speaking to God's people and our life as a church in transition isn't a giant leap. Moses is nearing the end of his long period of leadership. They had emotionally and physically gone a number of places together (including circling the desert for 40 years), and now it was time to prepare for what was to come. Sound familiar?

But here's the thing. Moses wasn't confused about what was next. His three-part prophetic counsel to them was plain.

A prophet WILL come.

That person WILL have God's words on their lips (and in their hearts).

And as people of God, the role is to listen.

(I might even add a fourth part as subtext - I can imagine Moses saying - And after all this time, you can trust me, right?)

The word "prophet" might leave us unsettled because it has the potential to carry modern baggage. There is a voice crying in the wilderness... (well, that sounds okay since it was in the Bible) but on the street corner (pause)... or on the television (well, now that might feel like a different story). It leaves us wondering if we can trust a prophetic word in our own time. A time, I would venture to say, when we desperately need it.

I have one adult child and one nearly adult child. When they passionately tell me the "truths" they have learned through their many avenues of communication, I have been known to ask, "I wonder what the source is? That would be surprising if it were true." Granted, our world can be pretty unbelievable at times, but still, I imagine God saying to us as God's children - Have you checked the source? And just in case you have forgotten, I am the Source... with a capital S."

The Hebrew root of the word prophet is "one who is called" or "one who calls." This twofold role of receiving a message from God and then sharing that message can only happen when enough space is held to wait, watch, and listen.

For a time, many Methodist Churches hung giant banners outside their buildings with the message "God is still speaking." Implying that we should not place a period where God has written a coma or a colon.

I do believe that God is still speaking, and I also want to name that the airwaves (of our lives and this worship community) have become overloaded with messaging. How can we trust what we are hearing? How can we tune out the static?

(Pause.)

We listen deeply... and openly. With all of its joys and struggles that an interim time brings, it is easy to self sooth with our own messages. Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, has said on several different occasions. "The only sermon we ever preach is that God is love. Everything else is just noise. Everything else is just the weather."

So let us love.

And check our sources.

And wait for the one who will come. The covenant God made with God's people was not just written in scripture; it is written in our lives.

A retired homiletics professor (*who became a friend*) once told me, "If you feel the urge to avoid preaching on a text, that is exactly where you need to go. The Holy Spirit is going to work on you there." I must admit I was tempted to shy away from Mark's gospel this morning, but I will lean in any way with just a few brief thoughts. The word "authority" can get mixed up with "power" or even "power over." Jesus' authority was not that. His was claiming a willingness to serve. To live his life for others. To point to the glory of God.

And what is named an unclean spirit is sometimes characterized as demonotic... and even an unhelpful or untrue connection to mental illness. I invite us not to get twisted up in the meaning. What might be the word for us to consider more broadly is, "What takes hold of us?" "What has too much power and distracts us from being the beloved children of God we are?" ...and then right-size those things in our lives through prayer and reflective living with those whom we trust. Being a Christian is not a solitary endeavor.

None of this is new news, and we need not be afraid.

Let's go back to the wisdom of Bishop Wright. "The Bible is timeless because people are consistent."

"Consistent" can sound disparaging... but it's not.

The stories of God's people were written in scripture and passed down through the ages because they continued to mean something. We are here in this place today because they still do.

I was also told that one should never preach "salad" sermons - meaning that they shouldn't be filled with "let us" instructions. But I am going to break that rule because some seasons call for direct invitations.

Let us be consistent in our love.

Let us be consistent in our faith.

Consistent in our hope and in the way we turn toward one another as a community in the way the psalmist suggests "with our whole heart."

And see how it changes you. Changes us.

It matters when we gather. Keep coming back. Keep going deeper and see how we can be consistently transformed by the power of the spirit working here in our midst.

Paul wasn't just talking to the early church in Corinth. He's speaking to us. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

Let's continue to build something together... even in the in-between. Especially during the in-between time.

Amen.