

When we think of prophets, our minds usually jump to Old Testament giants like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Some people think about Nostradamus, and others wonder about the modern-day prophetic movement in the church that had very different “words from God” in the recent past. Many Christians are scratching their heads and licking their wounds as we wonder which are words to the wise and which are demonic distortions. How can we know when it is God showing us something we need to heed, or when it is an unclean spirit working through a deceived person?

The past two weeks we heard stories about the prophets Samuel and Jonah. Both of them likely questioned and tested the Voice they heard, especially because the message they were asked to share was not something easy for them to say. In Samuel's situation, it was a confrontation with the Priest Eli who was also acting as a parent and teacher to young Samuel. In Jonah's case, the message was one of grace to people that Jonah held a grudge toward. This week our Old Testament story focuses on Moses sharing God's message to the wandering Israelites. Moses explains that God will speak through prophets and will hold people accountable for following God's direction. At the same time, he warns that there will be counterfeit prophets, and their consequence is death. That could mean a lot of things, but the deception will eventually be silenced.

There is a lot in common between the false prophets described in Deuteronomy and the unclean spirit that Jesus encountered in the synagogue. Both are loud liars. Both deceive and can ultimately destroy. But God's Word rebukes both. Jesus commanded the unclean spirit, “*Be silent!*”, which is the same rebuke he gave to the storm on the Sea of Galilee. And like even the wind and rain that obeyed Jesus, that unclean spirit came out of the afflicted man.

The whole story of this spiritual power encounter is sandwiched between acknowledgements of Jesus' authority. Mark 1:22 says, “*They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*” The word translated as “authority” is *exousia* in Greek. It's often described as the kind of power that comes from moral authority that sets people free, in contrast with the other Greek word for power, *dunamis*, which is the kind of power that shows force (like the word “dynamite”).

The contrast in the story is not between the two Greek words that describe power, but between Jesus and the scribes. Scribes were leaders who read and interpreted both Scriptures in the synagogue and legal documents in the public square. They were interpreters of the law, and then along comes Jesus, who as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets is more than they can control.

After the tension with the scribes is noted, Mark 1:23 describes, “*Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit...*” He was an ordinary person like most of us, who have faith but are also pained with tensions that the hymn, Silence, Frenzied, Unclean Spirit, by Carol Doran describes so well in verse 2:

*Lord, the demons still are thriving in the gray cells of the mind:
tyrant voices, shrill and driving, twisted thoughts that grip and bind,
doubts that stir the heart to panic, fears distorting reason’s sight,
guilt that makes our loving frantic, dreams that cloud the soul with fright.*

Talking about demons isn’t something most of us are comfortable with. Doesn’t a modern understanding of epilepsy, seizures, and mental illness explain away what the ancients called unclean spirits? Sometimes, it does. But we also must be willing to recognize that we live in more than a physical world, but a spiritual one as well. That’s why the Greek word for salvation, *sozo*, means healing people both spiritually **and** physically. Likewise, the Hebrew word for salvation, *yeshu’ah*, describes the rescue of our bodies **and** souls. There’s a reason Gabriel came to Mary and told her to name her child *Yeshu’ah* (translated as Jesus in English).

Sometimes God uses doctors to help “save” us physically by diagnosing and prescribing medications, or counselors to “rescue” and help us recognize our ruts and get our thoughts on healthier paths. But even if we had sufficient physical and mental health care in the world, there are still evil spiritual forces at work that we must contend with. “*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*” (Eph. 6:12). Jesus still carries full power to silence deception, dismantle systemic evil, and bring deliverance to both individuals and cultures who’ve been infected with lies.

Before we can work to heal the ills of our communities and culture, it helps to find spiritual healing and freedom as individuals. The third verse of Carol Doran’s hymn is a powerful *exousia* prayer:

*“Silence, Lord, the unclean spirit in our mind and in our heart;
Speak your word that when we hear it, all our demons shall depart.
Clear our thought and calm our feeling; still the fractured, warring soul.
By the power of your healing make us faithful, true, and whole.”*

When Jesus silenced the unclean spirit in the man at the synagogue, *“the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him”* (Mark 1:26). Much like a false prophet who speaks out of their own desire rather than God’s will, a demonic spirit may be temporarily loud yet without true authority. In verse 27 the other slice of bread in the authority sandwich is put on top: *“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.’”*

Dealing with the demonic is likely frightening for most people, but it’s something we can’t ignore if we’re going to answer God’s call. As Chris Pappalardo says, *“When our work environments are so cutthroat that we sense that we need to cut corners or trample on others to get to the top, we are not merely surviving a toxic job; we are being used by a spirit of greed. When we create factions in our church devoted to preferences, we are not merely undermining unity; we are being used by a spirit of divisiveness. When our devotion to our own nation results in xenophobia and racism, we are not being overly patriotic; we are being used by a power of hell.”*

There are still lying prophets in this world. There are still unclean spirits seeking to steal joy, kill connections, and destroy faith. God’s prophetic call to us is rarely as future-tellers, but always as truth-tellers and grace-doers. *“I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days”* Joel 2:28-29.

You are not called to be comfortable. You are called to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Jesus did that as he rescued and healed the man with the unclean spirit while he also frustrated the authorities with his life of genuine, supernatural authority. May you experience Jesus’ cleansing in your soul, and may you hear and follow God’s prophetic call to live out God’s loving truth and grace with everyone you meet. Amen.