

## Deuteronomy 18:15-20

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho  
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The Word of the Lord from Deuteronomy 18:17-18: "And the LORD said to me, 'They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

### I. Moses and the Prophet

The people of Israel stood at the base of Mount Horeb for one reason: God had brought them there. They'd been slaves in Egypt for four hundred years, but the Lord remembered His promises. So He called and sent Moses to confront Pharaoh and command him to let the people go. Ten plagues and a Passover later, Pharaoh relented momentarily and the Lord led the Israelites out of Egypt in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When Pharaoh pursued to kill them, the Lord delivered them across the Red Sea and washed Pharaoh's armies away. The Israelites were free—and they were free from Egypt solely because the Lord had delivered them.

The Lord wasn't just delivering them *from*, but *to*—to the Promised Land. They had a destination—a home of their own—guaranteed because He said so. On the way through the wilderness, He'd rain manna down from the sky for them to eat, and He'd see to it that their clothes and shoes wouldn't wear out. These were His people by His doing, and He would see to all of their needs.

Along the way, the Lord brought them to Mount Horeb, also called Mount Sinai. There, He descended on the mountain in a cloud of glory. There He was, present with His people whom He delivered; and there, He declared the Ten Commandments. Note how He began in Exodus 20, because this is huge: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). His first Word that day was not demanding or accusing Law, but a reminder of His mercy. He reminded them that He'd rescued them and promised them a home. He reminded them that they were already in His care, and had been all along. Now, He declared His commandments. He didn't declare them to tell them how to *become* His people—they already were His people by His work. No, He gave them His Law so that they would know those sins that would lead them astray, that would cause them to forsake Him and return to slavery and death.

So the Lord—their strong Deliverer—declared that they were His, free from slavery; and He told them what they should do and not do so that they did not forfeit His deliverance and freedom.

And how did the people respond to this awesome news of their adoption? What was their first recorded reaction? Hearing His merciful Word straight from His mouth, what did they say to Him in return? Was it thanksgiving? Songs of praise? Vows of obedience?

No. We hear, "Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die'" (Exodus 20:18-19).

The people stood far off and asked that the Lord not speak directly to them anymore. That might not be what you expect. But it is completely in keeping with God's Word. There, at Mt. Sinai, the people saw God's holiness and their sin. They witnessed His glory descending on the mountain and they knew their own corruption. They heard His commands of how they were to be His people, and they knew in their hearts that they would never be His people by keeping those commands. They knew He had delivered them. They knew He saves. They knew His laws were just. And hearing Him speak, they wanted Him to stay away. Because of their sin, they couldn't bear to be near to God in His glory.

How did the Lord respond? This may be even more surprising. We hear of this in our Old Testament lesson for this evening. He did not chide them for unbelief or scorn them for their terror. Instead, He said to Moses, "They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him" (Deuteronomy 18:17-18). The Lord declared that their reaction was right: because they were sinful, they could not come near to Him. Because they were unholy, His voice was terrifying. Because of their sinfulness, His Law demanded more than they could ever do. God Himself agreed that He would no longer speak directly to them. Instead, for now, He would speak through Moses.

But Moses wouldn't live forever. Therefore, the Lord promised to send another prophet. He'd send lots, but one would be unique. He would be like Moses, in that He would stand between God and man, declaring the Word of the Lord. But He would do something that Moses couldn't do: He would draw sinners close to God. There was only one way this could be done: He would have to make them holy. He would have to take away their sin.

You hear of this prophecy's prophet in the Gospel lesson today (Mark 1:21-28). Like Moses, He stands between God and man. Unlike Moses, He is *both* God and man. The words of the Lord are in His mouth because He is the Lord Himself and He is the Word made flesh. But He does not terrify the people because He has veiled His glory in human flesh. There is nothing about Him that looks like God, nothing in His appearance that makes Him stand out or drives people away. In fact, there are times in His ministry when they press upon Him so that He is nearly driven off the shore and into the sea.

But while He doesn't look glorious or powerful, His Word is not diminished. In Capernaum (Mark 1:21-28), He is confronted by a man with an unclean spirit. The spirit knows exactly who He is, human and divine: Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God. Jesus rebukes him: He speaks and chases the evil spirit away. Like all of Jesus' miracles, it's a demonstration that He has come to defeat sin and death and devil. He has come to drive them away.

He has *not* come to drive sinners away. He has come to gather them back to God. Sinners can't come near to God, so He comes near to take their sins away so that they might be in the Lord's presence and not far off. That is why His most glorious act doesn't look glorious at all: it's at the cross, when He is lifted up, that He draws all people to Himself (John 12:32). It's by His death for their sin that He opens the way to heaven and everlasting life.

But the reaction of sinners isn't any better. When the Lord was on Mount Horeb, how did the people respond? They stood far off in fright as they saw His holiness and heard His voice. When the Lord was on Mount Calvary, crucified, how did the people respond? They mocked Him, scorned Him, rejected Him. That's the sinful nature at work. Confronted with God in His power and glory, sinners want to run away. Confronted with God in His humble service, they turn to bullies who want to get rid of Him.

But the Lord remains the same, offering forgiveness for all who will believe.

## **II. Horeb and Calvary, Law and Gospel**

So as far as sinners are concerned, the Lord can't win. They don't want Him to.

What I mean is this. By nature, sinners want God to be powerful—someone who can get them out of a bind, fix things, work miracles and the like. After all, a powerless God would be of no help to anyone at all. But here is the problem for sinners: they want God to act according to their rules. The unrepentant sinner's prayer is, "*My* will be done, not Yours, O Lord." Sinners want a powerful God on a leash. But if God has that much power, then He also has power to set the rules. He has the power to establish His Law and tell people what they should be doing in service to Him. When sinners hear that Law, the Law accuses them. It says, "Thou shalt not do things your way, because your way is unholy and leads to death and destruction." It may not be a voice thundering from Mount Horeb. It may be the voice of a parent or friend, a sermon or the whisper of conscience. But it's still the Law of God. It causes sinners to draw back and say, "We don't want to hear it. We don't want to listen to this God." From there, actions vary. They might choose a different religion with different rules. They may choose to denounce Christianity as intolerant. They may pretend to remain faithful but stop their ears to the Word. But all of these responses are different versions of saying, "God's telling me what I'm to be and do, and I don't want to hear it. I'd prefer He keep His distance."

But sinners treat the Gospel no better: remember how they treated the Son of God at Calvary. As He died to save them from their sins, they mocked Him because He wouldn't save Himself. Sinners don't have much use for a Savior on a cross. For one thing, since they've rejected His Law, they don't want forgiveness for their sins. For another, remember that sinners by nature want a powerful, wonder-working God—and a God who would suffer, bleed and die is just too weak for them. He's just too much like them for them. That's why the world sees no use for a church that proclaims Christ and Him crucified: if people don't want forgiveness, what's the point in talking about Jesus all the time? Far more valuable, in the world's eyes, is a church that stops talking about Jesus and starts proclaiming the merits of sin and human goodness.

So the world doesn't like God on Horeb or Calvary very much. But because the Lord has given you faith, you rejoice in both. The Lord appeared on Horeb for your good. He gave His Law so that you might have some semblance of how holy He is and how unholy you are. He gave His Law to show you your need for the Savior. You'll be tempted to grow angry when confronted with sin. At times, you'll be exposed as unrighteous enough that you'll want to run and hide from God, keep Him at a distance. Repent. The Lord does not expose your sin to drive you away, but to draw you to Him in Christ.

For on Calvary, Christ is there also for your good. There, He has paid the price for your sin, suffering God's judgment so that you might be forgiven. Risen from the dead, He comes to you humbly in His Word and Sacraments, forgiving your sins and giving you everlasting life. You'll be tempted to scorn these means of grace as too common to be important. But they are common only because the Lord comes near again and again and again—to make you forgiven and righteous again and again and again. Unlike at Mount Horeb, your Savior doesn't say, "Keep your distance, for you are sinful." Because of Calvary, He comes to you in His means of grace—draws so close as to say, "This is My body and this is My blood. I join you to Me. I join you to My death and resurrection. For My sake, the kingdom of heaven is yours; because you are forgiven for all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen