The Ministry of Authority
Deuteronomy 18: 15-22, Mark 1:21-28

A Sermon
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Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in Your sight O Lord our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

The first reading this morning from the Book of Deuteronomy is a pivotal passage where Moses sets forth the litmus test for determining whether a prophet is true and speaks for God, or false and speaks on his own initiative. In a word, and a rather abrupt word, Moses says, if the prophet speaks the clear commands of God and if what he says comes to pass, he or she is a true prophet – listen to them. If, on the other hand, someone speaks words that exceed or contradict God’s commandments, or speaks on behalf of foreign gods, that prophet is false and will surely die. And you’ll know this prophet is false because what he or she has said will not come to pass. Now Malachi was the very last Old Testament prophet to speak for God. And after he had passed the scene, God’s people entered 400 years of silence. Many of you in your Bibles have a blank page between the Old and New Testaments. This is actually a helpful visual of what this 400 year period must’ve been like - it was a blank page in Israel’s religious history. Not that God was not living and active among his faithful; and not that he was not speaking in the hearts of these faithful, but there was no clear and public word given from God to men through the voice of one of his servants. It was a time of prophetic silence.

So into this vacuum other voices rose up to fill the silence. We know these as the scribes and Pharisees. In their most ideal sense, these men sought to be faithful to God by diligently studying and applying the law of God. But that effort soon bogged down as they began to parse God’s law into one burdensome commandment upon another, weighing people down with unreasonable demands rather than setting them free to seek the Lord. Because they were “experts in the law,” these religious leaders became powerful; and that power began to corrupt. They became masters of “pettifoggery” - to dwell on trivial matters and minutia. They erected a standard of politically correct speech that everyone had to conform to or else feel their scorn. They were fond of quoting authorities from the past – not a bad thing – except for the fact that that’s all they did. They rarely spoke a fresh word born from their own experience. Theirs was a borrowed spiritual capital. In the worst case, they were hypocrites, “white-washed tombs” not living out in their own lives the commandments by which they judged others.
And so their life and teaching lacked power and relevance. Their long discourses failed to inspire. Their sermons fell flat and made no courageous connections to life. They may not have been false prophets in the classic sense, but their religion was false, their lives were ineffectual, and their teaching was impotent. This was what the people had to look forward to each week when they came to worship. Into this banal and stale religious world, devoid of any freshness or originality, steps the Person of Jesus Christ. In our Gospel text for today from Mark 1:21 and following, we read: “And the disciples went to Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and was teaching. And the people were astonished...for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.”

I remember years ago in Junior High School being out on the athletic fields one afternoon in the early fall. It was still hot and humid; but in the distance we could see this remarkable steel blue line of sky moving towards us, and with some speed. As the wind picked up and the clouds at the front of the weather pattern began to move over us, all at once, the temperature dropped 10-15 degrees. It was exhilarating! As the cooler air rushed across us, it was clear the fall season had finally and decisively arrived. This must’ve been what it was like in the synagogue that day. In Jesus, a fresh wind from heaven had blown through the stale religious life that the people had grown used to. They were invigorated by something for which their souls had longed. The Bible calls it authority. Jesus taught with authority.

Authority is that rare quality in someone’s life that comes from convictions, not borrowed, but born in the crucible of personal victory over sin and trial; it’s the quality that comes from someone whose life experience has taught them humility and trust and teach-ability. Now by this I don’t mean that just to go through hard life experiences necessarily gives someone authority. No. There are people who go their whole lives wallowing in their weakness and temptation, who never resist. We don’t possess authority because we commiserate with others about shared vices. We possess authority because we’ve resisted, we’ve overcome! CS Lewis said, “Only those who try to resist temptation [actually] know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German Army by fighting against it, not by giving in.”

Before entering Capernaum, Jesus had been in the desert for 40 days and nights engaged in resistance! And he’d won! He’d made the hard decisions when no one was looking. He’d found strength in the word of God that man does not live on bread alone. He knew the power of the devil and the pain of obedience. His convictions were born early in his life, yes, but they were hammered out through the things he suffered. And so when he began his public ministry, he carried a personal authority that was clear. In was the fruit of the intersection of the knowledge of God’s word and submission to it. When he taught that day in Capernaum, he
didn’t just quote scripture like the scribes would do; but there was a coherence in his message that can only come from one who’s actually tried the faith, who’s bent his life to the demands of God’s word. GK Chesterton said, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.” Jesus has *tried the faith* and lived in obedience to its precepts. By the way, that’s why authority is the very antithesis of pretense. True authority in someone’s life is clear and unassuming; it’s self-validating. Jesus didn’t have to say he was speaking with authority. He had only to take the scroll, open his mouth and allow his years of faithfulness to inform the text, and the people recognized it. We can almost hear them saying, “Finally, finally someone has come who speaks the truth, whose words match his life, and whose message resonates with the issues of our hearts. He speaks with authority and not like our scribes.”

Some of you may be familiar with the work of Natan Sharansky. Sharansky was a Soviet dissident and one of the first political prisoners freed by Ronald Reagan in the mid-80s. He spent nine years as a political prisoner for speaking out against the totalitarian regime of the Soviet government. In his book, *The Case for Democracy*, he recounts the story of a conversation his father had with him the day of Joseph Stalin’s funeral – March 9th, 1953. He was 5 years old. As music blared from the loudspeakers in towns all over Russia, and as enormous portraits of “Comrade Stalin” lined the streets of his town, Sharansky’s father pulled him and his brother aside, and he said this. He said, “Boys, the man that our country is now honoring, that everyone’s calling a leader and a teacher, has in fact massacred millions of people. He’s a butcher.” He told them that they were fortunate Stalin was dead, and that this was a great day that they should always remember.” He then followed these shocking revelations with a stern warning to his sons to *never repeat what he had just told them and to behave exactly like all the other children.* And so “at the tender age of five, he and his brother were initiated into the world of ‘Soviet doublethink’” – a life where you thought and believed one thing, but could never say it for fear of reprisal.

Now fast-forward 30 years to 1983. Sharansky, living under the weight of that regime, has been in prison for 6 years for speaking out as a dissident. On a March afternoon, his jailors come in to the cell area and began throwing out copies of *Pravda*, the government-regulated newspaper. Splashed across the headlines, in bold type, was a condemnation of President Reagan for having the temerity to call the Soviet Union an “evil empire.” Some of you might remember Reagan’s speech in 1983 where he said this: an “evil empire.” Interesting, there were many who took umbrage at Reagan’s remarks when he said this. But ask those who were imprisoned in Russia! Sharansky says that when he and his fellow prisoners saw this headline, they began to tap on the walls and through the latrines the word of Reagan’s speech; and as the news began to spread
throughout the jail, the prisoners became ecstatic! “Finally,” they said, “finally a leader in the free world had spoken the truth, a truth that burned inside the heart of every man and women in that cell.”

When Jesus came preaching and teaching in Israel, he cut right through the doublethink of the day. His message was like a bold headline sent to the darkest corners of the land. Into that oppressive world of religiosity, Jesus spoke with authority and love. “Finally,” the people said to one another, “finally someone has come, over whom pride and political correctness have no power, who dares to call evil, “evil,” who speaks words of truth, whose life is marked by that virtue and obedience that carries freight, who speaks with courage and conviction. It was like fresh air had blown through the stale bars of a dank prison. And Jesus’ authority was not only felt through his words, but through his actions. He loved people with an unquenchable love; and in the spirit of the true prophets, he got results! What he said actually came to pass. No sooner had he preached this sermon in Capernaum than a demoniac challenged him. To which Jesus responded, “Be silent!” The phrase is literally, “be muzzled, and come out of him!” The unclean spirit convulsed and came out of the man, crying with a loud voice. “And…Jesus’ fame spread everywhere throughout all the region.”

I read this passage of Scripture and I must say, I’m encouraged – but more than encouraged. I’m lifted and quickened. I don’t know about you, but I think of the calculated, politically correct weight of our society, and I then I look to Jesus, and say, “Here is One who comes in truth, whose opinion isn’t shaped by the last person he speaks with, whose words aren’t carefully crafted so as not to offend. Here is one who speaks not in a spirit of fear and timidity, but in power, love, and a sound mind. This is our faith…this is our Lord. And God in his grace gives us glimpses of this. We hear echoes of this from time to time, and we know it when we hear it.

Twenty-one years ago, a sweet, aged, tiny little woman took the podium at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington D.C. where she was the keynote speaker for that day; and in her broken Albanian dialect, this 84 year old woman stunned the audience by what she said and the authority with which she spoke. There with the President and Vice President sitting to her right and left, she spoke of the precious value of the unborn and the great crimes of our nation and any nation that sets itself against the unborn child. She spoke of love, and how love, if it is true, must be willing to give until it hurts, for Jesus gave his life even for us. That sweet little woman whose face was hewn with the wrinkles of time, who could barely be seen above the microphone in that great assembly was Mother Teresa of Calcutta. What was so powerful about her words, was that they weren’t just words – her message flowed from her life! Here was a woman who’d spent her entire life rescuing those about whom she spoke - the poor, the outcast, the unborn. She’d opened adoption agencies in Calcutta and had
already saved 3,000 children who were going to be aborted. She not only knew the word of God that life is precious and that every child is sacred, she lived it. “Please don’t kill the child,” she cried out in her speech that day. “I want the child. Give me the child. I am willing to accept any child…and give that child to a couple who will love the child and be loved by [it in return]...” She spoke with authority and people knew it.

As Christians we walk in the authority of the Lord Jesus. When Jesus sent out his disciples on their very first missionary journey (Matthew 10) he gave them all authority to minister in his name in power and love. And the people responded. In the Great Commission (Matthew 28), where Jesus launches his disciples into the world, he says all authority has been given him, therefore we are to go in that authority, making disciples of all nations. I’m not talking about charisma or eloquence of speech or academic clout or being a gifted communicator. But that simple life of submission to God’s word that carries leverage and credibility. It’s what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the “ministry of authority.” And he was one who could speak thus.

“The church doesn’t need brilliant personalities but faithful servants of Jesus and the brethren… Authority can only be attained by the servant of Jesus Christ who seeks no power of his own, who is a brother among brothers, and is submitted to the authority of the Word.” (Life Together)

The secret is submission…and that’s the irony. We gain authority by submitting ourselves to the authority of God. Jesus’ authority came from his submission to God’s word and the will of his father. In submission he grew under the instruction of his parents; in submission he learned obedience from the things he suffered; in submission to God’s word he resisted Satan in the wilderness, and in submission to his father’s will he endured the cross. And because of this, he had authority. You and I have only one life to live…one chance to do this. We can coast along and play it safe, and just mirror back the values and vices of the world. Or we can submit ourselves to God and his word. We can look to Jesus, and say “not my will but thy will be done.” And the bright hope is that if God’s people will do this, if we will submit ourselves to the Lord…FRESH WIND may once again blow through our land, and people will call out upon the name of the Lord.

For to him who is able to do exceedingly beyond all that we ask or imagine, according to his power working in us, to Him be the glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever, Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)