

Lectionary readings for the 4th Sunday after Epiphany, January 29, 2012.
Deuteronomy 18:15-20; **Psalms** 111; **I Corinthians** 8:1-13; **Mark** 1:21-28.

God provides prophetic leadership to overthrow the powers of evil and bring healing.

Deuteronomy 18:15-20.

The Lectionary reading from the Hebrew scriptures presents one of the rare occasions when a text from **the book of Deuteronomy** is given as the primary option for the reading. In the whole three-year cycle of the Lectionary, Deuteronomy is listed only ten times. Five of those are optional readings, secondary to other readings. Two other listings of Deuteronomy are for Thanksgiving Day readings, leaving only three Deuteronomy texts as the primary readings on Sundays over a period of three years. This fourth Sunday of Epiphany is one of those three Sundays.

By contrast, the Lectionary has 72 readings from the book of Isaiah, including all optional texts and special days as well as Sundays. It is, of course, a Christian Lectionary, but its selections make clear that Isaiah is much more critical for Christian hearing than is Deuteronomy. For Jewish hearing, the relationship would be reversed. Deuteronomy is the heart of what Israel needs to hear from the Torah. It is Deuteronomy that gives Jewish people the opening words of their most basic credo, the *shema*: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. . . .” (Deuteronomy 6:4, Tanak translation), a text never listed in the Christian Lectionary (though it is quoted by Jesus in Mark 12:29).

Deuteronomy as a whole is the constitution of a theocracy—of a commonwealth in which only God’s law is the law of the land, in which apostasy from God equals treason. The part of Deuteronomy from which **our reading** comes deals with the offices and institutions of the theocracy. This part of the constitution provides for the administration of justice through local judges and higher courts, including prosecuting the crime of treason from Yahweh (16:18-17:13). It also provides for a modest and puritan-style kingship in Israel (17:14-20), and it establishes certain privileges and limitations for the Levitical priesthood (18:1-8). The remaining important topic in this treatment of leaders and institutions is prophets.

The surprise here is that Deuteronomy seems to take **a dim view of prophets**. The statement on prophecy is preceded by a full and rigorous condemnation of all diviners, soothsayers, augurs, and sorcerers (18:9-14). These practices by people who claim to tinker with supernatural knowledge and occult secrets are condemned as the arts of the people who lived in the land before Israel, people who were abominable to the Lord (18:12). From the viewpoint of Deuteronomy, there was only one real communication of divine knowledge and will from heaven, and that happened at Mount Horeb and its only mediator is Moses.

Thus, the ordinary prophets, like those who shared their ecstasy with Saul (I Samuel 10:10-12) and those who lived on the fringes of Elisha’s fame (II Kings 6:1-7), were not provided for in Deuteronomy’s constitution. Only one prophet was worthy of the name, and he remained with God (Deuteronomy 34:6, 10-12).

That one prophet (Moses) was, however, the **archetype of a future prophet**, one that God would provide when Israel truly needed this Moses-scale work again. “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet” (verse 15, NRSV). God will put God’s words in the mouth of that prophet, and all Israelites must obey him (verses 18-19). Any other prophets, especially any who prophesy in a different divine name (treason), must be condemned to death (verse 20). (In the age when Deuteronomy was being shaped as a reform constitution for the kingdom of Judah, 720 to 622 BCE, the prophet predicted by Moses was probably Elijah, who in his time would set Israel back on its Yahwéh-only path.)

This is a curious passage to be in a constitution. It is itself a prophecy. It created the expectation that God still has a great prophet in reserve, one to send in the time of the people’s greatest need. When John the Baptist appeared in Judea, people wondered if he was “the prophet” promised in Deuteronomy (John 1:21). And among some early Christians, the prophet was identified with the Messiah and the prophecy seen as fulfilled in the Messiah Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 3:19-23, quoting the Deuteronomy passage).

For such Christians, the prophecy in Deuteronomy was an invitation to ponder a theocracy in which the Christ (messiah) would assume the kind of powers exercised by Moses. Among much later Christians, however, many who listened more to Isaiah than Deuteronomy wondered whether any theocracy at all should be associated with the Suffering Servant.

Psalms 111.

The Psalm for this Sunday is a kind of “Hallelujah” in the background sung by a learned soloist in the temple. There are twenty-two lines of rounded praise of God’s works and character. The psalm is an artistic accomplishment, known as **an acrostic**. Each line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet from *aleph* to *taw*. The challenge is to make each line a smooth and pleasing sentence of praise, and if possible to get some continuity of thought through the successive lines.

An acrostic hymn is an offering of praise by a learned person, someone who early on memorized the letters of the alphabet, and someone for whom that sequence of letters has taken on overtones of love as well as power. This Hallelujah is from one who, working as a scribe, serves as a mediator of God’s word to the people. The singer knows and cherishes the authority and potential of the written word on behalf of “the company of the upright,” before whom this solo is now sung.

I Corinthians 8:1-13.

The Epistle reading is about an aspect of Christian freedom that results from **liberation from idolatrous powers**.

Many in the Corinthian churches were very conscious of their religious “knowledge,” including an awareness that the many “gods” and “lords” of the Greco-Roman world are not real. These supposed divinities need not be feared, because there is only one God and only one Lord who has the power to save and transform the lives of followers. This means that sacrifices left from the services of these other beings are harmless for Christians. The large quantities of meat available in the markets or offered at the free banquets of the

various temples may be enjoyed by followers of Christ. (For poor people this was often their only opportunity to have meat in their diet.) That is the background to Paul's discussion in I Corinthians 8. (The whole discussion continues until 11:1.)

Paul argues that there are some Christians for whom these idolatrous powers are not in fact that dead. Having lived all their lives in the presence of such "gods," the possibility of again falling into awe at them was apparently quite real. In order to not tempt or weaken the faith ("consciences") of these new followers, Paul urges that the course of love for knowledgeable Christians is to abstain from the meat of idol sacrifices. (Paul insists that love is more fundamental than knowledge in the Christian life.) The overcoming of the power of idols and demons by Christ was absolutely real, but the living of new life must still take into consideration those not yet fully liberated in their minds and souls.

(Is there some advice here for Christian Progressives concerning their views of Scripture?)

Mark 1:21-28.

The Gospel reading is the beginning of the overthrow of the powers of evil by the Spirit-empowered Son of God. The Gospel has brought Jesus through the baptism with the Spirit, the wilderness testing by Satan, and the calling of followers. These actions are presented as the work of the Holy Spirit in mobilizing **a campaign against the evil powers** that prevail in the human world.

The exorcising of the unclean spirit in verses 23-28 is the first front-line engagement of the two realms of power, Holy Spirit against Satan. This perspective is made very clear in the complaint by the unclean spirit: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are. You are the holy one from God" (verse 24, CEB [Common English Bible]).

This confession by the unclean spirit states the meaning of the early work of Jesus in Galilee. The spirit speaks in the plural: "what have you to do with *us*?" There is a multiplicity of powers holding the human world in bondage, and these powers are aware of their solidarity. A serious threat to one of them is a threat to all. The Reign of God, which is "at hand" or "has come near," is the breaking of the hold of evil structures on human lives. That Reign begins here. This incident, the first of the mighty deeds of Jesus the Anointed One, stands as the model of what liberation by the gospel means for those under Jesus' authority.

Even before the encounter of Jesus with the unclean spirit, the Gospel reports that the people could tell a difference in Jesus' teaching: "for he was teaching them with authority, not like the legal experts [scribes]" (verse 22, CEB). The people in this narrative probably do not hear and understand the whole exchange between Jesus and the unclean spirit; only those in the know (the hearers of the story) understand the full drama. The people see only a powerful teacher from Nazareth healing a poor possessed soul. This is clearly good and powerful, but it is far from the full meaning of Jesus' coming, and even of his triumph over this particular demonic power. The whole struggle against the Satanic dominion in the world will have much greater costs and effects as the campaign goes forward.

That the campaign has begun, and has liberated some chosen ones, is the Good News.