

Dt 18:15-22
29 January 2012

“Playing God”

Have you ever noticed what insurance companies label as “acts of God”? Sometimes it’s in the fine print of policies. What are these “acts of God”? Don’t they tend to be events like earthquakes and hurricanes and tornadoes? What about calm sunny days? What about gently falling snow? Aren’t they also “acts of God”?

No, there has to be plenty of destruction and mayhem. The shifting of the earth’s tectonic plates, the swiftly moving air that forms a violent spiral—these are attributed to God! Actually, it speaks volumes about our notion of God that we would even **imagine** these to be part of the divine plan.

(And yes, I am aware that people in the Bible tended to think that way. And no, I’ve never been caught in the middle of a powerful earthquake or a raging storm. At times like that, calm theological reflection probably **does** go out the window—along with some other things, like furniture!)

To this point, I realize that I’ve been a bit facetious. Still, I have a question that’s **related** to the “acts of God.” What’s going on when people are described as “playing God”? Doesn’t **that** tend to be stuff like changing a genetic code? Or maybe it’s making life-and-death medical decisions in a high-handed manner? Whatever the case, saying that someone is “playing God” is usually not meant as a compliment!

But again, I would say that that speaks about how we view God. To me, it says that we see God as a bully who’s pulling all of our strings. I would respond that that is not the God of Jesus Christ. I would respond, referring to **that** God (the God of Jesus), saying that we are **indeed** called to “play God.” We are called, not to be conformed to the image of this world, to the gods of this world, but to be transformed into the image of the God that is revealed in Christ. In that sense, playing God means playing the God of love and peace.

Someone with a role **similar** to playing God is the prophet. A prophet, quite simply, is one who speaks for God: “thus says the Lord.” In our scripture reading from Deuteronomy 18, we hear God say, “I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to [the people] everything that I command” (v. 18).

You may notice that the question is asked, “How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?” (v. 21). Very good question! Throughout human history, there has been no shortage of people claiming to speak for God.

How does verse 22 answer the question? “If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken.” This seems to go along with the way prophets are **usually** conceived, as those who predict the future. So if someone is accurate, that must be the gold standard!

There’s a problem with that, and we can see it a few chapters earlier, in Deuteronomy 13. There we read, “Prophets or interpreters of dreams may promise a miracle or a wonder, in order to lead you to worship and serve gods that you have not worshiped before. Even if what they promise comes true, do not pay any attention to

them. The Lord your God is using them to test you, to see if you love the Lord with all your heart” (vv. 1-3).

So, if would-be prophets say things that don’t come true, ignore them. But even if they do come true, they might **still be** false prophets. I don’t know about you, but that’s crystal clear to me!

We should note that chapter 13 speaks of those who “follow other gods” (v. 2, NRSV). And in today’s reading from chapter 18, we need to pay special attention to verse 22. It speaks of a word that “does not take place or prove true.” The Good News Bible collapses those two categories into one, simply saying, “does not come true.”

So does that make any difference? Does saying that something doesn’t take place mean anything different than saying that it doesn’t prove true? Remember, the “x” factor is what god (God) is being served.

Dennis Bratcher comments, “No matter what the [prophet] does or says, if his [or her] message does not enable the people to live in the world as God’s people, if his [or her] message does not prove true in the course of human history as the people live out their covenant with God, that prophet is not a true prophet of God.”¹

That speaks to the more important definition of “prophet.” A prophet is more than a fortune teller; a prophet is one who speaks God’s word to the people—to society. Those are the words that prove true.

A prophet is one who calls for justice, but it’s a justice of a certain kind. It’s not the justice that’s beholden to a political agenda or a certain narrow religious viewpoint. It is the justice expressed in the shalom of God. It is the justice that defies the idols that keep us down.

As Bratcher continues, “Any prophet who advocates any ‘other gods’ must of necessity be a false prophet, no matter how many signs [she or he] can perform, or no matter how accurate their predictions might be.” Can we see the difference here? It’s not about signs and wonders. They can be deceptive. A true prophet of God isn’t out for glory.

Unfortunately, we don’t have to look far to see plenty who are in the business of self-promotion. (I use that word “business” quite deliberately.) Sadly, as I’ve already suggested, the number of those equating their words with God’s word is not lacking. That would include some hucksters on television, some of whom are relatively harmless, as well as those who **really do** fill people’s heads with garbage. And then we have those who advocate bombing and going to war.

Our scripture reading takes this stuff pretty seriously (v. 20). Regarding one “who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded”: what is in store for such a one? Does it mean having a speaking tour cancelled? How about having one’s merchandise pulled from all the stores? No, the outlook is a bit bleaker. That one shall die!

It is somewhat audacious to speak for God. Stories are told of the desert monastics of the fourth and fifth century and their **reluctance** to take on that role.

Once, “when a saint asked Abba Theodore, ‘Speak a word to me for I am perishing,’ the old man replied sorrowfully, ‘I myself am in danger. So what can I say to you?’” As Dan Clendenin reminds us, for these old desert dwellers, “Uncritical

¹ www.crivoice.org/prophetdeut18.html

acceptance of [one's] own ideas, impulses, and inclinations [that is, not challenging them] was a sure sign of spirituality run amuck."²

Being hesitant to speak for God is probably a wise thing. Our scripture reading begins with Moses doing the talking. If you recall, his encounter with God at the burning bush wasn't something he was terribly excited about. He used every excuse in the book to get out of what God was telling him to do. But like the prophet Jeremiah of a later day, the fire inside was too much: he had to obey.

I've had a similar experience in my own life. When I lived in Tennessee and was in the Assemblies of God, our pastor gave me some advice. He told me that if I could **avoid** becoming the pastor of a church, I should do so. At the time, I thought, "That's some easy advice to follow. I have absolutely no intention of doing what you do!" Even when I went to seminary, I still wasn't planning on parish ministry. Eventually, I paid attention to what the Holy Spirit had been saying.

Speaking for God—playing God—is a tricky thing. Bruce Epperly speaks of over thirty years as a pastor and professor. He speaks of encountering "a number of authoritarian leaders and high pressure religious groups. They assumed a one-to-one correspondence between the leader's words and God's inspiration. They saw all questions as threatening and signs of pride, self-will, and apostasy [rebellion against Christ]. They shunned and silenced any alternative visions."³

As we've seen, prophets must cast a vision that not only comes true, but proves true. We're reminded that those who claim the authority of God must face certain questions. Do they "promote justice, creativity, and beauty? [Do they] seek what is truly best for the community, including honoring diverse opinions and lifestyles? [Do they] enable people to be more creative, more adventurous, and more compassionate?"⁴ That's the **opposite** of the unbending mindset that thinks it already knows!

These concerns have been underlined in recent weeks and months. Last Thursday, we received this email update from the presbytery office:

"By now many of you will have heard about the sad news out of Orlando, Florida from last week. At the Fellowship of Presbyterians' Covenanting Conference, held Jan. 18-20...a new denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO for short), was formally created. This new denomination will begin accepting member congregations beginning April 1, 2012.

"While many of those in attendance say that they have no plans to leave the PC(USA), it was suggested that as many as 100 congregations will decide to become members of the ECO. The exact relationship the new denomination will have with the PC(USA), including the Board of Pensions, is unclear. However, we mourn this schism as the loss of even one congregation affects us all as brothers and sisters in Christ.

"Promoting disunity is clearly a violation of the ordination vows taken by teaching and ruling elders. While orderly dismissal to another Reformed body is allowable, this may or may not be the process undertaken by those wishing to join the new denomination. It is our deep prayer that the Big Tent which is the PC(USA) will continue

² www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20060123JJ.shtml

³ processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yearb/2012-01-29/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany

⁴ processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yearb/2012-01-29/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany

to provide the opportunity for those with different theological opinions to be in covenant community with one another.”

To be fair, it is unclear if this new group actually is a denomination. On their website, they call themselves a “new Reformed body.”⁵ To me and many others, it **feels** like a new denomination, but I’ll let them define themselves.

I don’t know a great deal about the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians, but I am concerned. It concerns me when we split up into like-minded camps. When birds of a feather flock together, they put themselves into insulated bubbles. There is great value in hearing from others who can challenge us, who can call us out. It helps us in discerning, in weighing the evidence, of how God is speaking. Understand, I’m not excluding myself in all of this.

What ties us together is Christ. By no means am I saying that theology doesn’t matter. Still, even at our best, as the apostle Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 13, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly” (v. 12). Where we’ve been isn’t as important as where we’re going. He continues the verse, saying, “but then we will see face to face.” We have to be careful; else we will harden our hearts against each other. Kindness must be cultivated.

I want to finish with a comment of the dear departed Henri Nouwen. “Forgiveness often seems impossible, but nothing is impossible for God. The God who lives within us will give us the grace to go beyond our wounded selves and say, ‘In the Name of God you are forgiven.’ Let’s pray for that grace.”⁶

That offer of forgiveness is how we speak for God. I won’t pretend that it’s easy. To forgive means that something wrong has been done. But if we answer the call to “play God,” that is the way to do it.

⁵ www.fellowship-pres.org/faqs

⁶ www.henrinouwen.org (Daily Meditation for 28 Jan 2012)