

***Prophetic – Mark 1:21-28, Deuteronomy 18:15-20***

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Word came this past week that Sports Illustrated magazine is laying off its entire staff—either immediately or in the next 90 days.

This was a shock to the staff, of course, but also to thousands of people who have read and admired the magazine for many years. It's been limping along for a good while now, due to the influx of social media, 24-hour news cycles, and the internet. But for more than a generation, Sports Illustrated was a kingmaker.

My parents didn't subscribe to many magazines when I was a kid. But SI, in addition to National Geographic, was one of the few we did get. Each Thursday or Friday, it would arrive in the mailbox, and I remember bringing it inside and staring at the cover. Whether it was Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, Martina Navratilova, or Muhammed Ali, whoever graced that cover either became a star or had their stars made brighter.

That magazine became an authority on sports. Whether it was profiling the success stories or telling of the scandals, if Sports Illustrated said it or showed it you believed it.

There are other entities or people who were granted that kind of authority status: Walter Cronkite on the evening news back in the 60s and 70s comes to mind.

In general, we've found our authority in institutions: churches, government, political leaders. And yet, like magazines and newspapers, their authority has been eroded too.

Last week in my sermon, I talked about the marketing value of having a celebrity endorser. Companies will hire celebrities to pitch their products, but only if the celebrity is likeable and well-respected—if they have authority, in other words.

You may remember a guy named Jared Fogle. He was the young man several years ago who lost a bunch of weight eating Subway sandwiches. And in doing so, Subway made him their spokesperson. His weight-loss and how he achieved it gave him authority, until it was

revealed that Fogle committed crimes against children and was sent to prison. And his authority vanished.

One could make the argument that there's a crisis of authority in our world today. There are many, many voices (many prophets, one could say), but few clear-cut authorities.

What's the criteria we should use to determine who's an authority or a prophet worth believing? How do we determine if a prophet's words are true?

When it comes to faith, and knowing the ways of God, the world is littered with voices who claim to know what God's way is. "This is what God wants you to do." "This is when Christ will return." Or, "Do this and God will bless you more."

Do we believe these voices, though? Are their words words that God is communicating through them or are they simply their own words?

Here in Deuteronomy 18, God says bluntly, "Any prophet who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die."

God's not messing around: Don't soil God's name by proclaiming something that's not God's to begin with, God says. It's almost like God knows the destruction that false prophets can cause when they start professing their own agendas rather than God's.

For us then, how do we know the difference? How do we know that a prophet's words are God's or otherwise have authority?

The first question we might ask is, "Do these prophets have staying power?" In other words, have the words they've spoken *over time* been generally found to be truthful?

Some prophets are fly-by-night kind of people. Their words resonate but only for a short time. They're designed to be provocative, to get people's attention. But they fade shortly thereafter.

Jesus came onto the scene and stunned his listeners. From the get-go, he taught, Mark says, not like the scribes but as one having authority. And now, all these generations later, Jesus remains the same vaunted authority he has been from the beginning.

Who has staying power? Jesus does.

Another question we might ask in determining a prophet's authority is, "Where did this prophet come from?"

Also in Deuteronomy 18, God says that true prophets are raised up from among God's own people.

In other words, whatever they prophesy will affect them as much as anybody else because they have been called out from among the people.

This is an important distinction because it grounds the prophet's words and work in the community to which and out of which God calls them. Unlike a celebrity endorser, a prophet should be well-known by those in his or her community before they ever receive the call. People will have had the opportunity to observe their public persona in private, witness their character in action, and determine whether their message matches the Scriptures they have studied and discerned together in community. The prophet will have a stake in the community to whom he or she preaches, thus whatever the prophet proclaims for the community will affect him or her as well. To put it another way, the prophet's word is less directed toward "you" and more toward "us."

This is especially poignant in an age when it's possible for anyone to download messages from a host of would-be prophets who are personally detached from our real-life communities by miles of wire and satellite signals. Many people in our day assume that if someone is a celebrity or in a position of power that he or she must be an authority.

But a true prophet may not have that celebrity status. Instead, the people in their community know them -- warts and all -- and their message is often difficult to hear. Most of the time, real prophets are rather reluctant because they know that the message God has laid on them can sting them as much as it will the rest of the community.

Prophets with authority are part of the community they prophesy to.

And a third question we might ask in determining a prophet's authority is, "Does the prophet back up his or her words with action?"

Jesus spoke many words during his ministry. But he validated those words with action that improved the lives of those around him.

In Mark 2, while in the synagogue one day teaching, Jesus was approached by a man with an unclean spirit, a demon. And Jesus tamed the spirit and drew it out of the man—amazing all the onlookers. And this action was so profound that it led the crowd to confess that this new teacher was different. For he taught “with authority.”

Can a prophet walk the talk? Not that a prophet with authority today needs to be a miracle worker like Jesus, but can he or she demonstrate a willingness to turn his or her words into actions that validate what they are saying?

Jesus didn't just preach and teach and then move on to the next town. Amid the people who were both his own and outsiders, he solidified his authority by what he did.

Does he or she have staying power? Does he or she have roots of some kind in the community to which he or she is prophesying? And does that prophet back up words with actions?

When it comes to the people in whom we place authority, the answers to those questions may very well be the telling tales.

2024 is an election year. There will be many voices this year that will proclaim to have all the answers. Some of them will strike you as prophets. To which ones will you grant authority?