Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Mark 1:21-28

As I was reading this part of Deuteronomy with Moses giving instructions to the Israelites about how they are to live in the new land God has led them to, I couldn’t help but remember the story about Moses call to lead this people. Moses had all kinds of questions, or should we call them objections, as to why he should lead the people. But to all Moses’ objections, Yahweh answers that Yahweh will be with him. And so he has led the people – some say they have wandered for 40 years. Whatever, it was a long time! And now he’s preparing them for the time he will no longer be with them. Leadership transition is a hard thing. Some of the questions that arise here are similar to questions congregations ask today – how will we know this person is qualified? Or by what authority does this person lead? In this case, Moses assures them that God will send one from among them and will speak through that person to them. And there is the assurance that if the words such a leader speaks are not true, that person will die.

Facing a leadership transition does cause people to be somewhat anxious about the future, even if you’ve been there before. But in some ways there are similarities between this church and that of the Israelites. They were headed to a new place and you may be too. Moses urges that people look to God for guidance; that recommendation is applicable here too. We are God’s people and God will guide if we but trust that possibility.

Over time people have thought the leader who most represents the qualities Moses spoke of was Jesus. Oh yes, there were numerous prophets who followed Moses, but many of them fell short of carrying God’s Word to the people – though I believe sometimes it was that the people didn’t want to hear the message being conveyed to them. An example is Jeremiah; what he said came true but the people didn’t want to hear it.

So Mark, in his rapid-fire style, tells us about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. A comparison with the beginnings of the other Gospels may shed some light. After the genealogy and birth story, Matthew begins by showing Jesus as a teacher extraordinaire with the Sermon on the Mount. In Luke Jesus reads from Isaiah and shares his reflection on that reading – causing people to react strongly to his words about the poor and oppressed. John’s Gospel opens with the wedding at Cana and the abundance of water turned into wine. Abundance and joy!

In Mark, Jesus is preaching in Capernaum and most in the congregation are impressed - astounded even. But there was a man in the congregation who challenges Jesus. “What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?” The outburst is attributed to an unclean spirit, which Jesus calls out. (He may even have been rude – “Shut up!”) What does that reveal about Jesus? Jesus is pointing to a boundary breaking God. We see that in other places in Mark, but it is particularly evident at his death through the empty tomb.

Mark’s Gospel is compact. He doesn’t spend a lot of words to try to explain Jesus’ authority, but he shows us with this example the kind of work Jesus will be about. He is showing that gathered people what the good news will look like. The good news will push back against the broken places in the world helping people see God’s presence in their midst.

As these scriptures remind us, God has been faithful in the past and if we trust in God’s guidance it will continue in the future. God still reaches out in many and various ways in our time. I believe God has spoken through people like Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, Jr. but there are also some lesser-known people. One example is Ann Atwater. Ann lived in Durham, North Carolina during the time of the integration of public schools. As a matter of faith and out of her love for her children, she worked and called for – even demanded – a school’s desegregation within Durham for the sake of poor black and white children within the city. As an African American woman in the South, she spoke of a vision of the future marked by equity for people of all races and classes within her community. Ann’s work extended to working with the local Ku Klux Klan leader and others in order to create a better future rooted in justice.

We are hearing new voices today looking not only for greater equality but for all of us to recognize the ways racial and gender inequality is affecting life. Dr. Fauci has been a strong voice for recognizing the marginalized especially since he worked on the AIDS crisis. I know the pandemic has raised many concerns for people of many BIPOC groups. How many people have thought of the challenges facing Native American communities? Can we recognize God’s work among us raising up new voices to work for a more just world?

Thinking again about Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum – did Jesus’ words capture the imagination of the people there and did they hear a new possibility in his voice – something they may not have heard before? As God works in us and through us may there be new challenges and possibilities for us.