

**Series:        Becoming the People of God**  
**Sermon:       Among Your Own People**  
**Scripture:    Deuteronomy 18:15-20 and Mark 1:21-28**

**January 28, 2024**  
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### **Deuteronomy 18:15-20**

**15** The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. **16** This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." **17** Then the Lord replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. **18** I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. **19** Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. **20** But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die."

### **Mark 1:21-28**

**21** They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. **22** They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. **23** Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, **24** and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." **25** But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" **26** And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. **27** They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." **28** At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

This series on Becoming the People of God has really been causing me to think of my own becoming...my own journey of trying to be all God calls me to be. My decision to go to seminary took me several years of discernment and prayer. It started when I was trying to figure out how to rebuild a long-neglected relationship with God and I took a Disciple Bible Study class. It is a 34-week class culminating in a discernment process of listening to God's path for your life and I was surprised to learn that a big part of that process had to do with other class members telling me what THEY thought God was asking of me. I learned there that being called by God, the journey of becoming, had as much to do with what God was saying to others, as it did what God was saying to me.

It was the first time I realized that discernment is a community process, not just an individual process. I thought if God were going to call me, God would speak to me about it directly, but instead God spoke through my classmates. Later, God would speak through an elderly woman who, upon hearing me preach my first sermon, hastily scribbled on a paper towel at my kitchen table one Saturday night at 11 pm after my husband came down with the flu and couldn't find a replacement, she said to me after that sermon, "You just found your calling."

God would speak to me through the affirmations of my mother, my sister, my old EMS partner, my former pastor...the list kept growing until finally one day I did hear from God, who casually said, "So, when are you going to believe them?" The thing is, I wouldn't be standing in front of you today had people around me not looked at me and saw God at work, even when I couldn't see it myself. I've now been in ministry for 18 years and I am blessed to still have people affirming my call and I am so grateful God speaks to me through the community around me.

When the Israelites were becoming the people of God, God would speak, and they would tremble. God's voice apparently seemed like an approaching storm and its deep rumble and fiery light terrified those listening. They begged Moses to take one for the team and go speak to God and then just come tell them what God said. Hearing from God directly does seem a bit like setting on the edge of a storm...the electricity in the air, the fresh wind of the Spirit, the sense of power about to be unleashed, the unknown headed your way...it can be exhilarating and overwhelming. It can make it hard to hear what God is saying.

In the Deuteronomy text, God is promising to raise a prophet, like Moses, who would speak on God's behalf to the people becoming who God was calling them to be. That was the role of the prophet, not to predict the future, but to be the spokesperson for God....to tell the people what God wanted them to know. God would raise up many prophets for this purpose. When a prophet spoke, the people who listened would hear a word from the Lord...they would learn and discern something about God by what they heard. We notice in God's promise though that prophets are called up from among the community. The prophets God would call would be their neighbors, their kin, their coworkers, those who worshipped alongside them.

We find this in the story from Mark's gospel of Jesus teaching with authority and casting out evil. It is the community that recognizes something different in him. He is not like the other teachers. He is not like the other scribes. He has a gift they have not often witnessed, one so powerful that evil spirits even rise up and take notice. Despite the depictions in works of art, Jesus wasn't born with a golden halo over his head declaring to the world his status as divine king, he was born like any other baby, fully human and fully God, and for the first thirty years of his life seemed to be like everyone else...until the Spirit of the Lord fell upon him and anointed him to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, and liberation for the oppressed. Jesus was becoming the Messiah God had sent him to become, but it was the people that needed to recognize him. It was the people that needed to be amazed and shocked to find God moving in and calling upon one of their own.

What I'm wanting us to see in these two texts is our responsibility as a community of faith to help one another in our becoming. Our calling is a personal one, but it is also one that is affirmed by the community, by the body who stands alongside us amazed because they have seen a spark of the divine in us that they hadn't noticed before. It is the community who first recognizes and then learns to listen to those called to be prophet, or teacher, or healer, or apostle. It is the

community who first recognizes and learns to trust those called to preach, or serve in missions, or leadership positions. It is the community of faith that serves as a supportive incubator for those who discern a call.

I can look around this room and find many examples of this but let me just lift up a few of them for you this morning that I have witness just in the last few years. Some of you may not know this but in The United Methodist Church we have a pathway to service called the Lay Servant certification. To be a certified Lay Servant you have to first be recommended by your community. The leadership of the church has to affirm you by vote, saying that they see God's call upon you. We have not had any certified Lay Servants in this church for five years or more, until this year. This year we affirmed four! This year we recognized four people who are becoming what God is calling them to be.

Being affirmed by the community is nothing new to Chuck Byers, he has spent decades serving God in various ways and even though Chuck is retired from his calling of being a Local Pastor serving churches throughout our conference, Chuck is not retired from serving God. Even though he has had the class, even taught the class, before Chuck signed up again to be certified as a Lay Servant because we all see that he still has a calling to fulfill. Even in retirement, the Spirit of the Lord is on Chuck, and he is becoming what the Lord is calling him to become. Thank you, Chuck, for trusting what we see in your and continuing to answer the call.

The spirit of the Lord is visible in Jean Stetler. I have seen God's call on her life deepen and flourish. I've also noticed that others see it as well. When our long time Lay Leader, Arnold Lakey, decided to retire from that position, we all wondered, who do we get to fill such big shoes, because Arnold had done such a wonderful job as your leader for many years. As I prayed about it, one name came to mind, and it wasn't long until others came to me having heard the same name. Jean Stetler is called to this role. Now I know Jean wasn't so sure, but I also saw that Jean knew to trust her community and when they said, "We see you have the gifts we need in this role," she said yes. She said yes because members of this congregation see something different in her, something that stands out in her, something that leaves us in amazement – we have seen the spirit of the Lord guiding her into becoming a servant of the Lord and a servant of the people. Like the man in Jim's story earlier, we look at Jean and see her striving for obedience, we see her care for others, her good works, her willingness to serve even when her first response is always, "I think you made a mistake," and we see something of God in her. Thank you, Jean, for trusting what we see in you and answering the call.

The Spirit of the Lord is also visible in Jim Brooks. Jim has served God through his primary vocation of teaching, where he has influenced two generations of students, spending 39 years in the classroom and headed toward his third generation. But in almost that same amount of time he has served you as the Music Director. In the past few years, you have seen something new in him. You have noticed his role has shifted and he has stepped out beyond his role of

directing the choir and choosing music. He has become a liturgist, leading us in all acts of worship. He has preached, he has taken on some pastoral care and conducted visits in homes and hospitals. As he alluded to earlier, he has a pretty remarkable ministry at his mother's assisted living, become a confidant and trusted friend to many residents who have no one else to lean on. People are looking at Jim and seeing something of God in him. You, as a community, have affirmed this new spark in him, you have told him you see it, encouraged him to fan the flame and see what takes hold and he is listening. This past week he began a new journey of becoming a Certified Lay Minister, a relatively new designation in The United Methodist Church, which recognizes laity who are called to serve God in the local church after being affirmed by the church and the district committee of ministry. The goal is that Jim will become an assistant minister appointed to our congregation and serving in leadership, worship, and the arts. Jim wouldn't have taken this step had you not inspired, encouraged, and affirmed to him that you see something of God in him. Thank you, Jim, for trusting what we see in you and answering the call.

The Spirit of the Lord is also visible in Kaleb Thornton. Kaleb is one of the youngest of our active members. He will graduate high school this year and head to Montreat College in the fall. He sings in the choir, serves as our acolyte, is elected the President of our Conference Council on Youth Ministry, and is working toward his Eagle Scout. Kaleb has also served occasionally as a liturgist, leading worship and has preached for us a few times. Each of the roles Kaleb takes on, he hears words of affirmation and encouragement from you – from his neighbors, from this community who is living into the vows you took at Kaleb's baptism to nurture him in his faith and help him in becoming all God is calling him to become. Next month, Kaleb will hop on an airplane and head to Florida for a conference exploring and discerning his own call into ministry. Thank you, Kaleb, for trusting what we see in you and seeking an answer to how God is calling you to serve.

These are our four lay servants, but they are not the only ones that the Spirit of the Lord is upon. Look around you. I know you can see God in many others in this room. Folks, that is part of our duty as a community of faith, to encourage and affirm God's presence and call in others...to be supportive incubators of servanthood and calling. I encourage you, if you see something of God in someone, TELL THEM! They need to hear it. God may be doing a work in them and they are hesitant, unsure, frightened, and in need of outside affirmation. They need to know you are amazed at what God is doing in them and through them.

When we see God in each other, we help each other to unleash the spirit that empowers us to embark upon this journey of becoming...and now we get to see what amazing things God has in store for us all.