

Raising Up

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

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First Presbyterian, Luling

What could I do that would cause you to stand up? As we've discussed in sermons before, when I'm standing here in the pulpit, and you're sitting there in the pew, I can cause you to stand up by simply saying, "Please stand." Or, we could be playing Simon Says, and I could say, "Simon says stand up," and if you wanted to win, you would stand up. Or if you were a mannerly, aristocratic gentleman in Victorian England, and I as a lady stood up, you would automatically stand up also. You wouldn't even have to think about it. Or I suppose I could be more mischievous and put something like a pin or a balloon in your seat, and that would cause you to stand up. Or I could say something like, "Whoever wants ice cream, stand up," and you probably would. In theory, I can cause you to stand up.

God was promising the Israelites that God would cause a prophet like Moses to stand up. Hebrew works completely differently from English, and the couple of times in there where it says God will "raise up" a prophet, the literal meaning is that God will cause the prophet to stand up. I started investigating this verb because I thought maybe there were undertones of resurrection, with the raising up, but that's not the case. At this point in Israelite history, they didn't have a concept of resurrection or even of an existence after death. God raising up a prophet isn't a resurrection. It's more literal than that. But it's also not simply a "causing to stand up," in the ways that I might be able to cause you to stand up.

God causing a prophet to stand up, God raising up a prophet, is a bit more like Jesus calling disciples. It is God's act, God's initiative, God's plan. Not the prophets. Biblical prophets never volunteer. They don't stand up on their own. God causes them to stand up. God raises them up. Just like Jesus interrupts the everyday life of the disciples to call them to come and follow, God interrupts the everyday life of the prophets and tells them to speak the words. God raises them up and gives them words to speak.

Where God raising up prophets and Jesus calling disciples is completely different is in the human reactions to the divine action. The divine action is essentially the same: you, there, stand up and do what I ask you to do. We've read the past two Sundays of the disciples' human reaction, which is to stand up and follow Jesus. They'll have their failings and shortcomings soon enough, but their initial reaction is to be raised up and to follow. Prophets, though, react in the

opposite way. Who me? No, not me. You can't mean me. I'm ill-suited to this because of fill-in-the-blank reason. Some even run in the opposite direction as far and as fast as they can. God raises them up anyway and doesn't let them squirm away from their calling.

Prophet or disciple, hold on to the thought that this calling comes at divine initiative, not human. The individual who is called or raised up by God has to decide how to respond, but it sure seems like the response is eventually going to have to be in the affirmative.

God does raise up prophets as individuals, but it is always for the sake of the community as a whole. God raises up prophets like Moses, to be an intermediary between God and the people, because the direct experience for God was a bit much for the people to handle. God raises up prophets like Jonah and Amos and Hosea and Jeremiah and all the rest, because God has something to say not to those individual prophets, but to the people. Jesus calls the disciples for the sake of the whole world, because he needs them to share the good news not for their own sakes but for the whole world.

These words in Deuteronomy are not directed to whichever people are going to be the prophets that God will raise up. These words are directed toward the community of faith, and they're meant to be a reassurance. Rather than despair at Moses's death, or feeling abandoned, they're encouraged instead to look toward the future, to be on the lookout for those whom God will be raising up. They're encouraged to listen to words they may not want to hear, because those unwanted words may indeed be God's words to them. They're encouraged to look and listen for those whom God is raising up, causing to stand up as prophets. And they're assured that those people will exist. God will raise up a prophet like Moses. God will give that prophet words to say. God is not leaving them on their own.

Those words of assurance are for us, too. It may be that God is raising up one of us as a prophet, to speak God's words to the community. It is far more likely that we are God's community, a part of God's community, and that God's prophets are out there, speaking God's words to us, if we would notice and listen and hear. It's far more likely that we need to hear that God is still speaking to us. God is still speaking to us. Possibly not words we like to hear. Possibly not from people we want to hear from. But God is still speaking to us.

May this assurance of God's activity then cause our souls to stand up, raise up our spirits, encourage and enlighten and motivate us. Let us be raised up.

