

reflections for 9Aug2020

1Kings19:9-18

This doesn't model perfectly, but through three readings today, we're going to trace three steps:

1. What God has to say
2. How God says it
3. What that means for you

So first is hearing what God has to say to the prophet Elijah. We'll hear Elijah fleeing from violence and death, a 40-day quarantine isolation journey, going to hide in a cave.

If our first step is about what God says, we can pretty well tell what Elijah *wants* God to say. He's waiting for God to support what he'd been striving so faithfully to do, perhaps wanting encouragement and reinforcement of his kinda self-justification. He's feeling wronged and would like God to approve of his self-righteousness.

Even though this first step is what God says and not how God says it, that question lingers here. We don't take Elijah's spelunking cue to venture off into caves, though we might relate to his locale on a distant mountain. We might think to go to a Holden Village mountain retreat to find God. Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai, is even more obviously holy.

It's the place of the Ten Commandments, so we might take what God says as being what we're supposed to do, to follow God's rules. Elijah likely thought that's what he'd been doing, doing it right, doing what God said.

But Elijah was having a tough time, and had just about had it. He was finding the faithful work lonely and difficult. We also wonder, if we've been putting in the effort, what does God do about it? When we're confronted by all these traumas of life now and witness storms and other destruction, what will God say? If we want to know how God responds to our exhaustion and readiness to be done dealing with hard situations, Elijah's arrival today is timely.

For staring out from our sheltered place as catastrophes go past, we may interrogate the storminess to determine if they're acts of God (as,

of course, the insurance industry would dismissively have them).

Elijah, though, doesn't see or hear God in the big supernatural events. But in the silence, he hears a voice, asking him why he's there. What God says seems first to be an invitation to introspection. Elijah says he's lonely and afraid, that he's been trying so hard.

God responds stunningly, not with encouragement, not with support for faithful efforts. God does not say, "keep up the good work." No, God talks about Elijah's successors. Instead of commending Elijah's resilient fortitude, God says there are 7000 others. Elijah is far from alone. No matter how important Elijah's efforts are as the Bible's biggest prophet, God is more.

God's work is about you, but is also so much bigger. You may take it as a slight or as a relief. As you shelter from passing storms, as you're rundown and weary, as you'd feel you may even deserve commendations for your efforts, I invite you into the quiet of worship today. I invite you to hear that still, small voice that is larger than the best you can do. Expand your vision. Remember you are not alone. For all your valiant efforts, it is not dependent on you. God is more.

Romans 10:5-15

First step, what God says: that it's not only what you do. God is more. Second, how God says it.

This is a meaningful passage to me, not just because it gives me the chance to talk about feet and do my little fashion show.

More, it's because it focuses on why we're together, the point of worship, and the reason I put so much effort into these words. It's about preachers! I've gotta like that! But it's not just good news for me.

Sure, we could warp this reading into oppressive bad news, turning it into a formulaic declaration that you've accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior and, because you've called on his name, you can count yourself among the saved and get to work saving some other souls. We don't need that emphasis.

Let's take it that you find faith helpful. Let's say you believe God is important, and that you rely on God. Maybe in the face of death, you need something more, and here you find hope. Maybe when there's so much chaos and uncertainty, you need to expect there's some control. Maybe when everything is cutthroat and polarized and life seems expendable, you need a validation that it's worth trying to love, with a moral heart to the universe. In the midst of the storm, you may need to hear a voice, and you want to hear what God says.

Few of us are going to hear God while standing in a cave. Instead, you hear the word of God as we gather in worship. This means you're not left alone with your inner voices, which so often either give false self-assurances or else are overly plagued by self-doubt. You're not left alone trying to guess God's identity in the storms and violence and current events.

You have someone bringing good news! You have a preacher (who has beautiful feet, if I do say so myself), so you know God isn't merely for saving insiders, waiting until you pass a secret formulaic test, isn't restrictive in generosity, but is generous to all, loving to all, gives life and breath to you and all creation.

When you're doubting, when it seems you haven't done enough to earn it, or that you're not getting what you deserve, we preach to each other with the voice of the Psalm (85) that there's so much goodness from God that it's sprouting up from the earth and pouring down from the sky, rushing in from every side, to kiss you with peace and all that's right, leading you forward like a path. I'd wager you don't feel much like that on your own, so you need that voice.

And you evidently need my voice. Heck, you're even paying me so you can keep tuning in here, and I can tell you: do not fear! You have one who saves you!

Matthew 14:22-33

First step, what God says: it's not only what you do. Second, how God says it, including through me. Now third, what it means for you.

There's another storm. The Bible recognizes that we face such things. We need God's answer and presence.

The disciples are in a boat. We might take that as being in it together, certainly better than Elijah hiding alone in a cave. The boat is one of the original images or metaphors of the church, carrying us together, carrying us through. This room where we find ourselves now, gathered together even through online participation, is technically called the nave, exactly like the word navy. It's a ship, a boat. Or maybe, in MCC perspective, a canoe transporting us safely not only in choppy waters but amid the beauty of the world.

It is while in the boat that the message of Jesus gets delivered: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." There's lots to unpack in those few words, about God's identity and a peculiar term for courage. The best word study says that behind this "summons lies the claim of Jesus to give the necessary assurance in his life and work. [It] gives joy and confidence. It chases away anxiety and distress." (Kittlel, vol III, p26) Take heart. For the what and how of God's message, I could hope for nothing more than that in my preaching.

But in the story, Peter decides it's time to abandon ship. Sometimes this gets interpreted as if Peter is trying to do something really faithful. But the tipoff is that he says, "If you are who you say you are..." The others who say this in the Gospel are Satan in the temptation, the high priest who condemns Jesus, and taunters around the cross. It's fine to doubt and be fearful, and Jesus won't let you go. But it's not positive to question and test Jesus.

Just as the message to Elijah wasn't "get back out there and give it another go, try hard, give it your all," the point of this story isn't that Peter dared mighty things and just needed faithful confidence to take the plunge.

It's that the boat is already getting you where you need. This is where Jesus' message is for you. But even if you fall out, he'll still reach out to you. You may do good things, with your connection to the ship. Plus, it's not only all about you. So relax. Do not be afraid. Take heart. God will take you where you need to go. That's plenty.