

5th Sunday after Trinity: July 16, 2017
“God’s True Gracious Power”

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text is our Old Testament reading from 1 Kings, and before we get to the text, some context is in order. Elijah had spoken the Word of the Lord to King Ahab, the Prophets of Baal were exposed for the fakes they were at Mount Carmel. With the false religion overthrown, King Ahab wines and moans to his wife Jezebel everything that Elijah had done, and Jezebel with rage threatens to murder Elijah. This prophet, who up to this point had stood firm and valiant in the face of opposition, now goes running for his life. He flees the Northern Kingdom and travels to the southernmost city in the Southern Kingdom. There he leaves his servant and travels another day into the wilderness. He begs the Lord to take his life, but instead of death he is fed by angels. He then travels for another 40 days to get to Mount Horeb, the Mount of God. It is here where our text begins, “There Elijah came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and God said to Elijah, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’”¹

I don’t know if there can be anything more unnerving. Just like Adam, just like Jonah, Elijah is running. He is running for his life and trying to hide from God. Under the pretext of Jezebel’s threat, Elijah is looking for a safe harbor away from what God told Him to do through His Word. In Elijah’s attempt to cut all ties, to go off the grid, and go underground, the Word of the Lord comes to him. And if that weren’t enough to be shell-shocked, the question of the Lord is enough to strike terror in any believer’s heart. It has to be, without doubt, one of the most unnerving questions we humans could here from God, “What are you doing?” Then God adds to the question the little word “here.” This only serves to exacerbate the precarious pickle Elijah is already in. Here is Elijah – squeamish, timid, pathetic, frightened, horrified and petrified, seemingly down-and-out, trying to escape from Ahab’s wife, Jezebel—only to be enlightened and reminded by the fact that there is, and always will be, the everlasting presence of the Lord himself. The most unnerving

¹ 1 Kings 19:9

of all circumstances is consciousness of the Lord's presence! God knows all, sees all, and is everywhere.

It's easy for us, to read Elijah's story in hindsight and scoff at his naiveté, his gullibility, his faithlessness, and the lack of trust that Elijah presents, but in truth, we are just as shortsighted in much of our own vision—more often than not, we are terrified by the things of this world, even though we've seen firsthand the almighty power of the Lord in daily life.

In fact, that's what makes the opening lines of the text so intimidating, so upsetting, so unnerving. Elijah, of all people, should know better. He has just experienced firsthand, over a reasonable length of time, at least three significant acts that demonstrate the power of the Lord, and yet he's intimidated by one person. Elijah had just been privy to the unending oil and flour of the widow at Zarephath and he was instrumental in the resurrection of her son. It was at this miracle she proclaimed of Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."² Then, in the immediate context of Jezebel's threat, Elijah had witnessed the vibrant disclosure of the Lord's power when the Lord vanquished the prophets and worshipers of Baal atop Mount Carmel with the fire that "consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench," so that "when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God'"³ And yet, in spite of being a witness to these firsthand demonstrations of the Lord's power, we see Elijah now cowering before the wife of Ahab, Jezebel.

Now given this context of Elijah's education of the Lord's power, the things Elijah bore witness to, and had a hand in, modern day Americans want to think that Elijah would relish in this moment. In a feelings based and consumer driven culture, one would think that Elijah would savor being in the presence of God and would take pleasure in the reminder that the Lord Almighty is talking to him and calling him by his own name.

Yet, that is not the facts. What we find is much like the Pharisee and Publican, much like us today. Elijah does not feel too comfortable about his future, nor does

² 1 Kings 17:24

³ 1 Kings 18:38-39

he experience bliss in God's presence. This is not a feel good conversation. In fact, Elijah quips to God of his own self-works. He attempts to puff himself up before God. God asks, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" And Elijah responds, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away."⁴ Now what Elijah says is true, but since we're aware of what Elijah has experienced firsthand in seeing God at work, it is amazing to see his lack of confidence in the Lord's calling.

But what is even more astounding is the Lord's patience with Elijah, with his complaint, and truthfully, with us also. It really is as Jesus said, "O you of little faith."⁵ God could have given up, and justifiably so, on Elijah, but He doesn't. Instead, the Lord goes to great lengths to resurrect Elijah and his faith. The Lord uses what He always uses: His Word. By the power of His word, the cosmos came into being. By the power of His Word, payment for sin was made. By the power of His Word, children are born as heirs in God's Kingdom, and God's forgiveness is given through mere vessels of bread and wine. So here, God comes to Elijah with the element of His creation that truly shows His steadfast love, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."⁶ God shows His strength, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts."⁷

God's comfort is not found in the terrible and awesome forces of nature. God's presence can surely be known, but not His gracious presence. Elijah finds no comfort in these acts. Where is God? He can be found everywhere. But where is God for you? He has located His gracious presence, His forgiveness, in humble means, in humble acts, so that we can have no doubt of His grace, and be assured of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

What is also great here in 1 Kings, is that God grants Elijah the knowledge that his calling is on the same level as Moses, because the Lord has Elijah hide in the cleft

⁴ 1 Kings 19:10

⁵ Matthew 8:26

⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:18

⁷ Zechariah 4:6

of the rock and the Lord parades His glory before Elijah. The Lord tells Elijah, “Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord.’ And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.”⁸

Now the Lord repeats His original question, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Although Elijah repeats his original answer, his tone has now changed. There is confession. There is humility before God. He no longer stands bold before God barking complaints and lodging just how good he is, or how much he has done for the Lord, He understands that He must first be veiled. He must be covered to be in God’s presence. It is not about how much Elijah does, it is about what God does. As this boastful word now takes on a new tone of presenting facts and committing it to God’s Hands, Elijah now understands that what he is about to hear from the Lord lifts him above and beyond the petty annoyances of Jezebel, and others, that seemed so life-threatening the first time around.

God tells Elijah, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. As you go, these are the men I want you to anoint as leaders. They are set aside for special work I have set for them. Then for added confidence. Remember, I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him. Elijah, you are not alone. My Word and my Church will always remain. You are simply called to be faithful to my Word. I am God. You are my people.”

In our text from 1 Kings, God seems to reverse the process that we hold dear in America. Elijah was first presented with the dynamic power of God in vanquishing the prophets of Baal, and then with God’s real answer to his complaint not with the power of the wind, earthquake, or all-consuming fire, but rather in the soft, gentle whisper that followed.

⁸ 1 Kings 19:11-13

Thanks be to God He came to us this way. God came not as the all-powerful Creator who could “blow us to kingdom come” as easily as He could blow apart the rocks. Rather, it was in “Thy Kingdom Come.” He came as a gentle, humble man, veiling His glory just as He did from Moses and Elijah. He stood silently, not even whispering, before a judge, jury, and executioner of His own creatures. And then in worldly weakness, in seeming helplessness and anything but power, He let those same sinful creatures kill him. All to extend His care to us in our helplessness, our weakness. All to forgive our sinfulness. All to enable us to stand before His unveiled glory for all eternity.

It still is “Thy Kingdom Come.” We pray this each time in the Lord’s Prayer. We pray “Our Heavenly Father give us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace, we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.” God’s care and concern for His people has never changed. Whether one is as famous as the prophet Elijah or obscure and common like me, Christ has “redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own.”

With Elijah we wonderfully pray,
“Oh, what blessing to be near You
And to listen to Your voice;
Let me ever love and hear You,
Let Your Word be now my choice!
Many hardened sinners, Lord,
Flee in terror at Your Word;
But to all who feel sin’s burden
You give words of peace and pardon.”⁹ Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

⁹ LSB Speak, O Lord, Your Servant Listens: stanza 2