

“Looking for Love In All the Wrong Places”

The Rev. Martha M. Shiverick - June 19, 2022

1 Kings 19:1-15a and Luke 8:26-39

Today’s scripture passages are about God’s power of health and restoration. The Gospel lesson tells the story about a man named Legion who had suffered from mental illness for years. Like many with mental illnesses, he was homeless and living outside civilization. Jesus encounters him and restores him to health in what is quite a dramatic story of Jesus taking control of the demons possessing the man and placing them in a nearby heard of swine who then ran down a steep embankment into the water and were drown. As Jesus continued his journey, the now-healed-man begged Jesus that he might be with him, but Jesus said he should return to his home and declare how much God has done for him. Except for the wonderful visual part of these pigs, now possessed with demons running into the water, the story is similar to many of Jesus’ healing stories. Jesus encounters a person who needs healing and restores them to health. Jesus’s healings are connected to their faith in him as a healer. In their gratitude, they ask if they can follow him where he is going and he says to return to their homes and tell people what God has done. Jesus’ healing stories and the connection to the healed person’s faith in Jesus as God is profound. But today, I would like to talk about the other healing that takes place . . . that is of Elijah in *1 Kings*.

We all know the importance of the prophet Elijah. Although very human, with personal doubts and struggles, he is thought to be the greatest prophet in the Hebrew Bible. So great, in fact, that the story of his death is that he was carried up to heaven in a whirlwind of a chariot of fire. And it was thought that he would return when the Messiah came, so many believed that John the Baptist was Elijah, and we hear the vision of Jesus with Elijah on Transformation Sunday.

But the Hebrew Lesson for today is not one of those stories, but a story of Elijah encountering God, and it is a story for us today in how we too might encounter the holy in our own lives.

Elijah is just coming down from a successful victory over Baal's prophets who were found to be false leaders of the false gods. Instead of enjoying and feeling empowered and vindicated by this win and God's triumph with him, Elijah hears Jezebel's threat against his life and . . . well, he becomes irrationally fearful, and he runs.

We hear the story and wonder why he didn't take her threat with a grain of salt having just won a huge battle . . . it is a mystery! But we also know that this great prophet was much like you and me and had insecurities and doubts just as we do. So, he flees and goes into the wilderness feeling alone and abandoned. For some reason, after God is with him through this huge triumph of his life which should have validated God's wonder and Elijah's calling as God's own, Elijah abandons rational thought and gives into emotion and some primal need to flee.

And God tends to him as he flees. We learn that God is with him through this period of terror. God does not shame Elijah for his insecurities but acknowledges them . . . and all the while also providing him with food and water for this 40-day retreat.

And at the end, God says to him that he will pass by and visit him.

And Elijah encounters the Holy . . .

And it was not in the great wind that came over him . . .

or in the might of an earthquake that came later . . .

or even in the fire that came after that.

God was in the sheer silence that finally came.

And in that silence God healed him, spoke to him, and sent him on his way to continue his ministry. WOW!

I retired last fall and returned to Cleveland and began to attend churches around my home in Cleveland Heights. We went to churches which had incredible preaching, spectacular music, and were architecturally the gems of the area . . . and after attending all those magnificent churches, my husband and I have settled on attending North Church in the heart of Cleveland as it is neither incredible nor spectacular, but for me right now, I feel God there. It is for me, a gem. For those of you who do not know anything about your sister Presbyterian

Church called North, it is an urban church comprised of mostly homeless people. Charlie Hurst and his wife Marie lead the worship services. Neither of them is a powerful speaker, but they are gentle and loving souls. Charlie leads the prayers, Scripture readings and gives the sermon, and Marie leads the congregation in calming meditations. She is ministering to a group of people whose lives are the earthquakes, the great winds, and the fires that Elijah witnessed. Homeless due to mental illness, addictive personalities, unemployment, or prison release . . . their lives are anything but calm and still. The members of the North congregation enter the sanctuary with more emotional baggage than anyone can handle, and you often see them moving and rocking in their chairs and twitching in place as they try and calm themselves to listen to the music and to hear the word of God and the message of God's forgiveness and unconditional love.

And Charlie and Marie minister to them as they minister to me. This past Sunday, Marie led the congregation through a meditative exercise so that we, like Elijah, might hear God's word in the silence and the still. Where people had been slouched in their chairs, she had the congregation sit upright in their chairs . . . to plant both our feet on the ground and to place a hand on our heart so that we might feel our heart and experience the rising and falling of our chests as we breathed in and out. She explained that with so much happening in our lives, we must learn to quiet our minds and allow God to enter in. She said that in the quiet and the small things in life, we will experience God's love and beauty. In the green of the summer, the billowing clouds, the sound of the bird's song.

And as I read the Scripture for today, I knew that this is what God was teaching Elijah as well. God is with us always. Life might feel scary, and we might feel that we have indeed been abandoned, but God is at work. We need to train ourselves to not get paralyzed in the earthquakes, the winds, and the fires that seem to be everywhere, but to look for where God is. We need to calm ourselves down and know that God is with us and loves us. We live in a world that overwhelms. We are in a pandemic . . . increasing inflation . . . and great political unrest . . . and any and all of these things can consume us. They can make us cynical, hate-filled, and feeling alone, confused, or depressed. Just filling our gas tank or turning on the television and watching the January 6th hearings can make us have heart palpitations. But the message in the lesson today is that God

does not abandon . . . we need to just listen for the Voice of Love (which although might seem quiet or silent), is indeed the mightiest voice of all. And just like it did for both Legion and Elijah in our Bible lessons today, it offers us health, healing, and restoration. And that, dear friends, is a gift from God and it is very good news.

Thanks be to God. Amen.