

Todd R. Allen
2017
Interim Pastor

January 22,
Second Sunday after Epiphany

“God’s Messengers”
“The Story”: Chapter 15

Texts: 1 King 19:1-8
John 6: 41-51

I Kings 19:1-8

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ²Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” ³Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. ⁴But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” ⁵Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.

Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” ⁶He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again.

⁷The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” ⁸He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

John 6:41-51

⁴¹Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴²They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’”

⁴³Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. ⁴⁴No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. ⁴⁵It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. ⁴⁶Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.

⁴⁷Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Sometimes—as the saying goes—you have to give credit, where credit is due, and I have to credit our friend Randy Frazee—one of the co-authors of “The Story”—for giving us a powerful image for today’s message.

Here, in my hand, is surely a symbol of our items: The cell phone. It’s become an essential tool in our daily lives--as I’ll think we’ll all agree—it has a host of really neat features, and one of them is caller ID.

Now, in the days of rotary dial phones—remember those?—you and I really had no idea who was calling us on the phone. The phone would ring. We’d pick it. We’d find out. And if the caller was a sales person, well, I’d wager we wish we could have avoided answering the phone. But, hey, no longer! Thanks to this cell phone, I know who is calling me—I can see their number right here--and if it’s a person I don’t wish to speak to, well, hey, I can do this: I can send them to voicemail. Just like this, with a push of a button. No need to speak to them! Thanks for calling...but no thanks.....

As we turn to Chapter 15 in “The Story” today, God is placing a call. To use this analogy: God is trying to connect with God’s people in a direct and personal way, and—to go further—a great deal is riding on whether God’s people take the call—and heed God’ call to them--or whether they send the call to voicemail—if they choose, if you like, to disregard—even to forget-- what God is saying to them.

Now, how did we get to this point in “The Story?”

Here is a very broadbrush update: Late last year we heard again about Saul and David. We heard again about how Israel wanted to have a king, just like the other nations around them, and so God allowed Saul to be this first king over Israel. Things did not always go terribly well with Saul, however, and so—just before Advent began—we saw how David was chosen by God to be king after Saul. David then chose Solomon, one of his sons, to succeed him. All well and good? Well, not all well and good, for while Solomon’s wisdom was a blessing to Israel, a fierce political struggle soon then arose between his two sons—Jeroboam and Rehoboam—so much so the nation of Israel split into two kingdoms. This sad development was the focus of last week’s chapter in “The Story”, Chapter 14, and what a sorry story it is.

But as we come to Chapter 15, today, we see that God has not forsaken God's people. Not by a long shot! No, despite all that has happened—despite all God's people have done to hurt one another and to also hurt God by what they've done—God has still chosen them for a high and mighty purpose: To be His light to the world—to be a shining example as a nation—as a society....

And so—to bring us to Chapter 15 today--God raises up prophets—or messengers—people who are filled with God's spirit—to speak God's word to the people—to the society—of their day. I've just used the analogy of a cell phone call: well, it is through people like Elijah—Elisha—Amos and Hosea—that God is placing a call. God is wanting to connect—with the two kingdoms that Israel has now begun—the north kingdom of Israel, and the southern kingdom of Judah...

Will the nation heed the call? Or will they choose to ignore it—to send the message to voicemail...?

Is God calling—us?

Is God still calling out--to you—to me--today?

Let us pray:

Opening Prayer: Grant, Lord God, that the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, will be acceptable in your sight, for you remain our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Is God calling you?

Is God reaching out to you, my friends?

Is something ringing in your soul....?

Rachel has just shared an excerpt from the story of Elijah. Elijah is one of the messengers God raises up in the time of division and discord I've just spoken about, and—as we begin Chapter 15 today—we find him in the court of King Ahab—and we see Elijah make a mighty pronouncement: There will be no rain in Israel for the next several years. And perhaps as we see Elijah in action, friends, we may think he is doing something extraordinary—something—more to the point—that you and I are either incapable of doing—or are not called to do to begin with....

Are you with me?

It can be hard to put ourselves in his shoes. You and I live so many years removed from Elijah—from his time—from his context; in fact, we may feel we have nothing in

common with him, but then—then—as Rachel just shared with us--we see him begin a journey—a trip into the wilderness of Beersheba, and perhaps—just perhaps—this fact of a journey may begin to resonate with us, for what is life, friends, but a journey? What is our life—as people of faith--but a walk of faith—a walk with God....? We all make this journey, as individuals—and with other people, too. And are we not on a journey, just now, as a church family—during this time between pastors? Well, we are—we are traveling from one point toward another point, and so the idea of a journey may—in fact—draw us closer to Elijah in one way....

I've asked each of us, a question, this morning. I've asked if we are on the receiving end of a call from God. And let me begin to answer this question by saying that you and I have been on the receiving end of a call from God for a long time (move to the baptismal font).

Our journey began when we were baptized. Each of us has been on the receiving end of a call from God since we were washed at this font—since the moment when—in God's grace and mercy—you and I were joined to Christ Jesus and when we became a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. But there is more to this: At this same moment we also received the gift of God's Holy Spirit. Yes, crucial to the Christian faith is the belief that at the moment of baptism, you and I are not just washed clean from our sin by the Lord Jesus Christ, but that we are also given the gift of the Holy Spirit. When I pray over the baptismal font during a baptism, I ask not only that an old life—a life lived in isolation from God's grace and mercy--comes to an end, but I pray that a new life—and a life lived in a intimate, personal relationship with God—begins for those who are baptized.

Now, maybe you may not remember that—after all, most of you were just a “wain”, as my Scottish friends would say. But this same moment is a monumental one, nevertheless—*for it is the moment—more to the point—when you and I are put on an equal footing with Elijah. With Elisha. With Amos and Hosea. It is the moment when we become as touched by God's Spirit, just as they were, long ago....*

And so, is God calling you?

Is God reaching out to you, my friends?

Is something ringing in your soul....?

There is nothing standing in the way, friends, of God making this call to you—to me—and any of us: All of us—as baptized Christians—have been joined to God, the Holy Spirit....

And, yet, as we read further today—we might wonder how much further this analogy can go: Elijah is touched by the Spirit—just like we are, too—but today he is running

for his life! He has incurred the wrath of the powers that be—in this case of Queen Jezebel, in particular. We may wonder how his story can connect with our own....

Are we also called to incur the wrath of the powers that be?

Can we also expect to run, at some point, for our lives....?

Here is what I believe: I believe that all of us—at one point or another—are called to take a stand for what we believe to be right—and wrong. I do. In fact, as I re-visit the story of Elijah—and the other prophets we encounter here, in Chapter 15 of “The Story”—I’m reminded of the need that arises not just once--but over and over!--for people of faith to draw a line in the sand, so to speak. *To do all they can to be honest and hard-working citizens of the societies in which they find themselves, for instance, and to also—when the policies of the powers run afoul of when they hold to be what is right and just in the eyes of God—to speak out for what they believe to be right and wrong, to lift up the duty and the reverence owed to God, in particular.....*

There have been many of these instances, down the years. This past Monday saw the observance of the Martin Luther King Junior holiday. I imagine all of us—in some way—called to mind the stand that Dr. King took in opposition to the policies of his time and place—we remembered the words that he spoke—and what powerful words they were.....

There have been other such moments, of course--moments where the Church of Jesus Christ has been called to stand tall. I’m reminded, for instance, of one of the documents that make up this book (lift up): *The Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*.

Here is a collection of confessions—or statements of faith—made by the denomination of which we are a part as members of Trinity—and let me lift up one of them today: The Theological Declaration of Barmen.

The Declaration of Barman dates from 1937. It was a time when the churches in Germany, in particular, had to come to terms with the rise of Adolf Hitler to political office. I don’t have to remind you—I am sure—of the actions taken by the Nazis against Jews and homosexuals, among others—but what surely alarmed the churches just as much was the desire of the Nazi Party to have church officials declare an allegiance to the state—to pledge personal allegiance, in fact, to Adolf Hitler—to have his word guide their actions—direct their thoughts. Well, the faithful in the church would have none of it. Listen to what they said when it came to state—or government—power:

“We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords....”

“We reject the false doctrine, as though the church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure, or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions...”

“We reject as false doctrine, as though the church, over and above its special commission, should—and could—appropriate the characteristics, the tasks and the dignity of the State, thus becoming an organ of the State....”

Stirring words.

Lines drawn in the sand.

It's hard not to read them friends, without a lump in my throat....but here's my point: *The people who drafted this document were people just like you—and me. They were ordinary Germans—men and women who belonged to churches throughout the country. And—now--let me add this: These same people knew they would face opposition in doing so.....*

The more I have learned—nay, painfully remembered—about those times, the more I am grateful for the God-given courage and conviction of fellow believers, down the years....

But we do not have to think only of such perilous moments in history—for there are other moments in time—other situations in our lives—where God calls us to make a stand, and while the situations may not seem so momentous as the example just given, friends the same principles are involved: *There are times when we need to draw a line in the sand, and say “no further...”*

There are times when we must say “no” to practices and policies that deny basic rights and necessities to others

Times when we must say no to behavior that abuses and demeans others...

There are times when we must say “no” to things that endanger our relationships and our family life—that infringe upon the freedom and the safety of those we love—even our society

Are you with me?

Yes, here are situations when we must say “no”, friends, because such practices are in opposition to the unity, to the justice, and to the reconciliation that God desires for us and for our world—to the testimony Scripture give to us—to the example Jesus give sot us, in his words—in his actions....

There are situations, yes, where we must draw a line in the sand, and when those times come, friends, perhaps we can feel akin to Elijah now in this way:

We can feel very vulnerable and afraid...

We can feel alone...

We can wonder if there is any point in going on in drawing lines in the sand—in standing up any more--because the cost of doing so is never in-expensive to us-- in body—in mind—in spirit...

For this is the place we find Elijah. The journey God has called him to make—this journey of the Spirit—has led him to a confrontation with the priests of Baal - the god of Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab—and this same journey has earned him the hatred of Queen Jezebel (which, given her "charming personality" is a very easy thing to earn!), and now, she wishes him dead—she has dispatched her hit squads. And so, Elijah has fled. He has come to Beersheba—as we've read—and he has come to a solitary broom tree where he sits—and, now, he asks God that he might die....

Not an isolated experience:

He's tired of being a solitary voice—and he doesn't want to be it, anymore....

He's tired of the stress of being under attack from those who were once our friends and neighbors—he's had enough of it....

Yes, he's ready for an alternative to the loneliness—to the fear--of being the odd person out, of being the person who has done what was right only to find that all who have stood with him have vanished away--that every hand, it seems, is set against him

Yes, here is where we find him. Perhaps we've been there ourselves. And perhaps—with Elijah—we've also wondered if we are no better - and perhaps even worse--than those who have gone before us. We've felt we are a failure....

There is nothing that stands in the way of God calling us, friends—point one, again, for today.

And now, point two, our journey through life takes us through some very dangerous country. Yes, we can also experience what Elijkah did—we can feel the pain and anguish of his prayer: "It is enough, Lord. It is enough...."

But—then--something happens now: An angel comes and touches him - awakens Elijah, for he has fallen asleep—and the angel tells him to "get up and eat". And,

now--low and behold--there is food nearby. There is a Cake of Bread upon a hot stone. A jar of water set near to hand.

Elijah eats and lies down again, as we've heard. But this is not enough: The angel returns and touches him once more, and says: "*Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.*"

And so, Elijah eats and drinks once more - and then, as the Scriptures say, he is able to journey for forty days and forty nights to Horeb - the mountain of God - the place we call Mount Sinai.....

Now, other amazing things—as you probably know--happen to Elijah while he is at the Mountain of God. In this place, he is granted a vision of God - he is given a message of hope for his own life and for the life of the nation—he learns, in particular, that he will be given a disciple named Elisha -someone who will keep him company and help him on his journey - and it will be Elisha—at the last—who will take his place as prophet over Israel—and so, all is not lost. All is not lost....

But I want us to hold the words of that angel to Elijah, the words "*Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.*"

What can we learn from them?

A simple—and a profound—lesson: *To survive on our journey, to have the strength to go through the barren places of life, to travel through those places where we are alone - because of divorce, or illness, or death - we need to eat the food that God prepares for us. Point three, now: We need to eat the food that God grants to each one of us.*

Now, where does this food come? Where can it be found?

It comes to us in the sacred stories of this book—it is found in stories like the one we have heard again today—this story of God's faithfulness to one of His messengers....

It also comes in the stories told by people of faith who enter our lives from time to time. Surely one of the great privileges—and joys—of being your pastor is to hear your stories, friends—the stories about how God has touched your lives, how God has changed you—and those around you--because of the tap of God upon your lives....

Yes, we need to cry out to God when we are in need, when we are in despair, and, then, and then we need to heed the tap that comes upon our shoulder in the middle of the night - that voice that whispers in our inward most ear - that voice that tell us to believe, to trust, to rise up and take the bread and the water that will be

there for us and to eat and drink - and to eat and drink again -- and to go forth, all to complete our journey.

And so, is God calling you?

Is honoring the call of God getting tough?

Are you running on empty?

Do you sometimes feel that you do not have the strength to travel onward for another day—let alone for another 40 days?

Perhaps it is time to eat!

And God's food is all round us, especially in this place:

It is here at the holy table (turn to face)

It is also to be found in the people who sit beside you: People who have faith - people who know where God is to be found. Yes, there is ample food here—for their stories—and the story of Trinity Presbyterian itself is also an exciting one—and so, to take the bread—take the fruit of the wine—listen to the stories--listen—and be nourished: **God is here, friends. God's angels hover round us!**

Yes, God is here -in the truth that we proclaim -in the bread that is passed around this sanctuary during Communion—and God is also here in the light that enters through the windows - in the snow-kissed trees outside—in the still waters—*the food, friends, is found in the daily miracles, in fact, that we can easily take for granted: The rising and setting of the sun, and the moon and the stars, the ever changing mountains and the rhythm of the seasons -the breath that comes in and out of our lungs each minute - I don't know about you, but I receive food—and a blessing--in the crying of a baby—in the laughter of a child—in the singing of a mighty hymn! How about you?*

God is here, in the Christ—and listen to what God says to us:

"I am the bread of life"

And again: *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven - whoever eats of this bread will live forever."*

And God says to us:

"Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

A simple—and yet a profound teaching for today: Food is available, my friends, food that will sustain us on our spiritual journey.

I like what Jean Pierre Caussade writes in his book "Abandonment to Divine Providence". Hear his words:

"God speaks to every individual through what happens to them moment by moment. The events of each moment are stamped with the will of God... we find all that is necessary in the present moment. We are bored (however) with the small happenings around us. Yet it is these trivialities - as we consider them - which would do marvels for us if only we did not despise them."

We are surrounded by ordinary things—but the ordinary is powerful. It is immaculate, glorious and wondrous, for those who have the eyes to see it.

Elijah's story.

The story of God's prophets—Elijah, Elisha, Amos and Hosea.

"The Story" Chapter 15.

It is also our story: Each of us is called by God to make a journey in this life—a journey of the spirit.

Listen!: God will continue to provide us with food for our journey!

Open your eyes

Pray to see it!

Take and eat it, friends!

Let it fill you up—let it make you strong—and you will reach the place that God is calling you to go....

And let me end this message with this prayer—a prayer by Janet Cawley—let us pray:

*"God of the way,
you are the road we travel,
and the sign we follow;
you are bread for the journey,
and the wine of arrival.*

*Guide us as we follow in your way,
holding on to each other,
reaching out to your beloved world.*

*And when we stray,
seek us out and find us,
set our feet on the path again,
and lead us safely home.*

In the name of Jesus, our Companion, we pray. Amen.”