

Scripture and Message for June 19, 2022

Scriptures: 1 Kings 19:1-15a & Luke 8:26-39

1 Kings 19:1-15a

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then 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."

Then 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. But 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."

Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He 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. The 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."

He 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. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces 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 a sound of sheer silence.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Luke 8:26-39

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.

When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"--for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.)

Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.

Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned.

The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

Message: From Madness to Stillness

When I was in seminary, I did an internship at a Presbyterian church. I was there for a little over a year and learned quite a bit about the way they do church. One big difference was that it is traditional for all four lessons in the Revised Common Lectionary to be read, and a sermon was to use at least three of the Scripture selections. This internship is where I learned about letting the Scriptures speak to each other.

This morning we read the Old Testament and Gospel lectionary readings for the week. When one first listens to them, they do not seem to have much in common. In one we have the prophet Elijah. He has just come from his great victory on Mount Carmel. Elijah had been a part of a miracle and had won a decisive battle with the priests of Baal. Having come down off of the mountaintop, Elijah feels despondent, depressed, and full of self-doubt. Out of everything that has happened in the past few days, all Elijah can hear is the words of his enemy, Queen Jezebel, declaring him a dead man.

In our second story, often called the Gerasene demoniac, the man is so filled with the voices of demons that he no longer has his own voice or his own thoughts. Today we would call his situation one of acute mental illness and we would try to quiet him and his voices through drugs and therapy. In Jesus's time, we didn't have drugs like Thorazine, so instead we chained people up and tried to physically and spiritually drive out the demons.

In the wise words of a child, both of these stories feature men who can only hear the bad voices.

I don't know what 'bad' voices you hear. Your voices may be telling you that you are not thin enough, or smart enough, or young enough, or rich enough, or kind enough...

Or your voices may be more insidious. Saying, "Look at the world we are in. See how terrible it is. Trust no one. No one cares. People are all just out for themselves. The rich eat steak and shrimp off gold platters while the poor use **our** money that the government gives them to buy steak and shrimp from Walmart."

Maybe your voices sound like the evening news, trotting out every terrible calamity that happened anywhere in the world. It is hard to continue to care for those dying from COVID in Africa when we hear about those dying from Russian bombs in the Ukraine. Or when we are sucked into the breaking news of the latest mass shooting, which when I was writing this week happened in a church....

There is just so much wrong in our world, the voices keep telling us that I just cannot hear anything else...

But Jesus did not leave the man in the cemetery alone with the legion of demons. Nor did God leave Elijah alone in his despair. Nor will God leave us.

God always has a counter narrative in the world if only we listen for it. God always has a counter narrative for us if we can let ourselves hear. Jesus had a counter narrative for the Gerasene demoniac. Jesus did not come to chain him and torment him. After Jesus begins to command the demons to leave, they cry out, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"--for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) (Luke 8:28-29)

Instead of torment, Jesus came with healing. When the man was finally himself, without the legion of demons, he sat at the feet of Jesus and wanted to join him.

Elijah also needed healing. He was also soul weary, and afraid. He had done great and terrible things on Mount Carmel. Elijah had told how God would cause a drought for all of Israel. At the end of three years, it was time to end the drought, but first Elijah needed to show the power of God.

²⁰ *So Ahab summoned everyone in Israel, particularly the prophets, to Mount Carmel.*

²¹ *Elijah challenged the people: "How long are you going to sit on the fence? If God is the real God, follow him; if it's Baal, follow him. Make up your minds!"*

Nobody said a word; nobody made a move.

²²⁻²⁴ *Then Elijah said, "I'm the only prophet of God left in Israel; and there are 450 prophets of Baal. Let the Baal prophets bring up two oxen; let them pick one, butcher it, and lay it out on an altar on firewood—*

but don't ignite it. I'll take the other ox, cut it up, and lay it on the wood. But neither will I light the fire. Then you pray to your gods and I'll pray to God. The god who answers with fire will prove to be, in fact, God."

All the people agreed: "A good plan—do it!"

²⁵ Elijah told the Baal prophets, "Choose your ox and prepare it. You go first, you're the majority. Then pray to your god, but don't light the fire."

²⁶ So they took the ox he had given them, prepared it for the altar, then prayed to Baal. They prayed all morning long, "O Baal, answer us!" But nothing happened—not so much as a whisper of breeze. Desperate, they jumped and stomped on the altar they had made.

²⁷⁻²⁸ By noon, Elijah had started making fun of them, taunting, "Call a little louder—he is a god, after all. Maybe he's off meditating somewhere or other, or maybe he's gotten involved in a project, or maybe he's on vacation. You don't suppose he's overslept, do you, and needs to be waked up?" They prayed louder and louder, cutting themselves with swords and knives—a ritual common to them—until they were covered with blood.

²⁹ This went on until well past noon. They used every religious trick and strategy they knew to make something happen on the altar, but nothing happened—not so much as a whisper, not a flicker of response.

³⁰⁻³⁵ Then Elijah told the people, "Enough of that—it's my turn. Gather around." And they gathered. He then put the altar back together for by now it was in ruins. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes of Jacob, the same Jacob to whom God had said, "From now on your name is Israel." He built the stones into the altar in honor of God. Then Elijah dug a fairly wide trench around the altar. He laid firewood on the altar, cut up the ox, put it on the wood, and said, "Fill four buckets with water and drench both the ox and the firewood." Then he said, "Do it again," and they did it. Then he said, "Do it a third time," and they did it a third time. The altar was drenched and the trench was filled with water.

³⁶⁻³⁷ When it was time for the sacrifice to be offered, Elijah the prophet came up and prayed...

³⁸ Immediately the fire of God fell and burned up the offering, the wood, the stones, the dirt, and even the water in the trench...

⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶ Things happened fast. The sky grew black with wind-driven clouds, and then a huge cloudburst of rain, with Ahab hightailing it in his chariot for Jezreel. And God strengthened Elijah mightily. Pulling up his robe and tying it around his waist, Elijah ran in front of Ahab's chariot until they reached Jezreel.

But after it was all finished, we read this morning about how Elijah then fled for his life and even after being cared for by angels answered God's question with, "I alone am left." I am all alone and I can't do it/this all by myself anymore! Where are you God?

Elijah's rebuttal to God is that he's doing his best. And sometimes it feels as if he is the only one doing any work here, the only one putting his life at risk, the only one who represents the true God of Israel. Does his complaint include God? "I alone am left," says Elijah, which might be another way of saying, "Where have you been?"

So, what's with the silence versus the madness of the destructive forces of nature? Could it be that God is announcing God's presence in ways that often get overlooked? We want the big show; we want lightning and thunder to announce God's presence. We want it to be so obvious that it would be hard to doubt. We want the herd of pigs to run away and drown themselves. We want the miraculous healing without the hard work. And there have been those moments, to be sure. But here in this moment, to us and to Elijah, God announces that God works in quieter ways, obscure ways, ways that seem natural—like coincidence, like happenstance, like in the everyday decisions that we make all the time. God is at work in and through what happens around us, even when it doesn't seem like it. God is present, even when it feels like absence. God is acting, even when it feels like stillness. God's counter narrative is at work – if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

The man in the cemetery in the Gerasene's was a force of nature who became a stillness. He moved from the earthquake of his madness to the silence of his right mind, a mind set on following Christ. Elijah was running for his life, so afraid of being killed that he wanted to die; then he encountered the silence and found the God he was longing for. He moved from despair to hope, fear to mission, and got back to work for the God he served.

God changed the narratives of the voices in their minds. God gave their stories a different outcome than continued madness, a life lived on the edges, a life lived in fear and loneliness. Immediately upon leaving the mountain, God told Elijah to ordain a helper we know as Elisha. Elisha never left Elijah, and in fact saw Elijah

taken up to heaven by God in a fiery chariot. Instead of being imprisoned and left on the outskirts of society, Jesus told the man who lived among the dead to go home and tell his story. And we read, “he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.”

God always has a counter narrative in the world if only we listen for it. God always has a counter narrative for us if we can let ourselves hear. Jesus had a counter narrative for the Gerasene demoniac. God had a counter narrative for Elijah, and God has a counter narrative for us – saying to all of the voices that tell us we are not enough that yes, we are exactly enough. Saying to all of the voices telling us to fear each other and the world that we are love each other and the world.

Just as God had a counter narrative for Elijah and the man, so also does Jesus have a counter narrative to all of the “bad voices” we listen to, if we have ears to listen and hear...

Amen.