

Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 7, Year C

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You heard me tell the children about John the Baptist and his camel skin clothing. Now when you hear about someone wearing camel skins and eating locusts who comes to mind? (John). Ahh, but who would have come to mind for the disciples of Jesus? Elijah!

Elijah is the great central figure of the first book of Kings, greater than Solomon or any other King. He becomes the new archetype of God's interaction with the people – the prophet who has no royal power, only the moral authority of God's word. The prophets pestered the Kings of Israel, rebuking them for being false, calling them to honor their function as God's anointed servant.

Elijah was the prophet who wore camel skins and ate locusts, and he set the standard for all the other prophets in Israel. He had powers of the spirit, by which he raised a boy to life and caused a torrent of fire to fall from heaven to consume his sacrificial offering. His curses and accusations sent shivers through the most powerful men of Israel.

Jezebel, on the other hand, a foreign woman and the queen of Israel's King, had no fear at all. The fear others felt was not from the fact that Elijah could do them harm, but from the fact that Elijah spoke the truth. Their fear was not of the man, but of the God the man, Elijah, served. Jezebel was from a pagan land, where gods were plentiful and allegiance to gods could be changed according to pleasure. She had no tradition of prophets who were in the power of the Lord; she only knew temple priests whose services could be bought and sold.

Jezebel did not fear Elijah because she had no fear of God, no respect for Yahweh as creator, no sense of gratitude for life as a gift. She was a woman of privilege, and gods served her. And so she rants and raves against the prophet without shame or fear, and Elijah becomes afraid of her.

He flees into the wilderness and so begins his journey from being a man blessed by the power and spirit of the Lord into being a man for who depending on the Lord is the sum of all joy and meaning. This is the story of how a religious person, who has received spiritual gifts and does great religious works, becomes a spiritual person who lives in such a harmonious relationship with God that nothing else matters. This is a transformation like that of St. Paul, the straight-A theologian and self assured example of righteousness, who becomes so enmeshed with God's spirit that he writes "I count all my former accomplishments as rubbish," and, "whether I live or die no longer matters. The only thing that matters is to be in Christ." This is the transformation like that of Mary, who first asks "How?" but then offers herself as a servant of the Most High.

Elijah flees in dread and runs until he is exhausted. He is not only physically weary, he is ashamed of his cowardice. He has become vulnerable, exposed to the countless spies Jezebel

has called upon, exposed to the desert wind, exposed to the scorn of his ancestors whom he has betrayed. An angel comes to feed him and give him drink, the sign of preparing for his next level of conversion. But Elijah is ready to surrender and once again falls asleep. The Lord wakes him again and nourishes him once more with heavenly food, telling him that he will need the food in order to make the journey ahead of him. Elijah arises and sees that he has been fleeing in the direction of Mt. Horeb, the holy mountain where Moses saw the burning bush and where the hand of God gave Moses the tablets. This is the mountain to which Jesus will come for his own transfiguration.

Resuming the heroic journey he heads to the mountain, fasting for the whole forty days and nights of his journey, sustained by the angelic food he has eaten, just like the Israelites were sustained for 40 years on the manna, the bread of heaven. He arrives at the mountain and takes shelter in a cave.

We are touched by the account of Elijah's encounter with God, learning that God is not in the violent wind or earthquake or fire, but in the sheer silence. Perhaps, though, we miss the deeply personal question God asks the prophet: What are you doing here, Elijah? Elijah responds out of his shame with defense and excuses – I have been zealous, I alone am left, I am in grave danger. So God sends the terrors in front of him, the rock splitting wind, the rolling earthquake, the all consuming fire. Elijah stands his ground in front of them. But as a sheer silence surrounds him, Elijah recalls the fear that made him run away, owns up to having rejected the leading of the spirit God gave to him. He covers his face in shame. Once again the question comes, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

The answer is no longer defensive, we might assume, but stated as one who, in the exhaustion of his own reserves is able to rely on the strength now offered him, a strength not found in the destructive energy that passed by him but the strength revealed in sheer silence that quieted his soul. The transformation comes from recognizing that the strength of force is not as great as the strength of intimacy with God, that strength in which all life and holiness are combined in peace. This is the voice of resignation, not to the surrender of wishing for death like before, but the resignation of one who now knows his life was never his to begin with.

What are you doing here, Elijah? "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."

On the same mountain where Moses stood, Elijah has also been tested. In flights from earthly powers and earthly wrath both men came to an encounter with the holy one. They were sent back to confront the powers of this world as if sent back from the gate of heaven. By virtue of their transformation, they are no longer concerned for power or success, for safety or survival. The desire of those who have met God face to face is to serve only God, no longer caring about the outcome. To serve God is the total joy. To live or die no longer counts for

anything. Elijah returned to the politics of Israel indifferent to the outcome, sure only of the need within him to speak what God put in his mouth.

Teresa of Avila teaches that this heroic journey is not merely for the few, but that in Christ there is an invitation from God to each and every one of us. The way often will include doubt and a sense of loss. It may include fear and shame. But the invitation to an encounter with the holiness of God is part of the gift of God in Christ. Because we have been given the Holy Spirit we can, through devoted prayer and contemplation, grow into the experience of union with God. The sacrament of communion hints at this truth and encourages it; the immersion of baptism gives us an image of it and prepares us for it. Spiritual unity with God is achieved in prayer and silence, and it leads to transformation of life and values. Fear subsides. Energy is other-drawn rather than self dependent. Joy becomes durable rather than fleeting. Judgmentalism ends.

Elijah returns to Israel and, without fear, confronts the King and Jezebel, his queen. He no longer relies on miraculous displays of power or spiritual showing off. He is content to let God's words stand as they will, relying on their power rather than his own. At the end of his faithful life he does not die. Instead he is carried into heaven in a whirlwind of fire.

For Elijah, as for all those who progress far with the spirit, death no longer needs to come. He has met God face to face, and lives this life as a sojourner, as one who simply waits for the time to return to the bliss and life he met on a holy mountain in the sheer silence that followed the terrifying storm.