

WHEN GOING BACKWARDS IS GOING FORWARDS

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on June 27, 2010

Crossroads United Church

1 Kings 19:1-5

Luke 8:26-39

Through an oversight on my part last week the lectionary readings for this week were read last week. While it matters not a great deal in the grand scheme of things, it is ironic to note that on the Sunday that it was announced that the appointments for Deb McCutcheon and myself have been extended for another year the text was, “As The Lord lives and as you yourself live I will not leave you.” This morning, one week after things have been made more concrete the text is, “What are you doing, here?” It is a reminder that God has a sense of humour. A reminder as well that we must not take ourselves too seriously, because the “ well hallelujah anyway” resounds.

We demand perfection of ourselves and yet God does not set the bar so high for us. And while I will not claim any divine intervention in causing the mix up in readings there is something engagingly ironic in the common denominator in both. Elijah of the Hebrew text and the Geresene demoniac of the gospel both had to go back from whence they had come in order for the plan of God to go forward. Elijah is commanded to go back and anoint new kings and also to anoint a new prophet, Elisha, who shall be Elijah’s successor. And the Geresene demoniac wants to become a follower of Jesus and become a part of his entourage, but he is commanded to remain in the Gerasenes and tell his story of healing and transformation. These are powerful stories of transformation, which remind that sometimes what we want is not necessarily what God wants for us.

We are introduced today to two men who are in great need, but for different reasons. Elijah has just emerged from a moment of great triumph. He has challenged the priests and prophets of Baal to a contest on Mt. Carmel. Both have built an altar of sacrifice and both have called upon their God to rain fire from heaven to ignite the sacrifice. Elijah had even doused the altar three times with water. The minions of Baal

are not able to coax their god to action, but the lone prophet of Israel is successful. He over sees the killing of the minions and should have been at the top of his game. But Queen Jezebel has threatened his life and so he has retreated to the wilderness where he prays for his death as his only salvation.

He is ministered to by angels and equipped and empowered to make the journey to Horeb where there is a theophany of wind, earthquake and fire. But God is not present in the earth shattering and frightening. It is in the sound of sheer silence when the voice of God is heard and Elijah listened to.

The gospel tells the story of an unnamed man healed by Jesus. We are first introduced to a man demonized, naked, out of control, living among the dead in chains. At the command of Jesus he is transformed and when next we meet him he is clothed, in his right mind, sitting in submission at the feet of Jesus and wanting to follow on with him. He stands out in the story, not simply because of the miraculous transformation effected by Jesus, but, because he alone of the company of the Geresenes wants to follow with Jesus. For the townspeople of Gerasenes living with the out of control is favourable to living with the power of God that cannot be managed or controlled. They do not praise God that an individual has been transformed and healed but are concerned more with the affect on the economy.

A sacrificed herd of pigs represents a significant loss of investment and income, and if the transformation of one can affect future livelihoods, then it is better to ask the agent of transformation to leave. Better to live with one naked madman in chains sleeping in the tombs than to risk more far reaching losses in the future. The transformed man wants to shake the dust of the Gerasenes from his cleansed feet, but is exhorted by Jesus to remain there-perhaps as a testament and symbol of what the Christ could effect if they were unfettered and freed from the fear that gripped them. Fear of the unknown or fear of self- preservation can be constraining and restrictive as both texts infer.

Bertrand Russell once said, “Neither a man nor a crowd nor a nation can be trusted to act humanely or to think sanely under the influence of a great fear.” And so it perhaps can be argued that it was in irrational fear that Elijah retreated to the wilderness believing that all hope was lost. And who among us has not experienced the paranoia that ensues when we believe that the one person who is out to get us can truly destroy us? Surely it is not unfamiliar to we of modernity that one is so gripped by fear that we too reach the end of our rope and retreat into a figurative desert and cry, “It is enough!”

We may not be accused of false modesty or inflated ego to confess that we have, at least once in our lifetime, felt similarly to Elijah. We have done all that has been asked of us and more. We have lived lives that have been righteous and good. We have done what we perceive to be the bidding and will of God. We have confronted our nemesis’ and adversaries with integrity and courage and still our good names are tarnished and we would surrender everything to know for sure and for certain that there is one who will neither abandon or forsake us; that there would be one who would speak for us in our defense and allay our fears that we are not alone. Who among us has not known at least one fleeting or agonizingly long moment where we felt as though there was not an iota of strength left within us to keep us on our feet? Elijah has his moment of victory and triumph and then he is frightened for his life. He retreats to the wilderness and says, “It is enough!”

The story of Elijah in his moment of extreme vulnerability speaks to me personally and theologically. There is not a hint of doubt levied against God, but only at himself. He is afraid and he truly believes that he cannot continue. He doubts his own tenacity, courage and faith in himself. He is spent and cowering in fear at the threat of a mortal woman. The tipping agent is idle threat and yet it serves to disempower him and causes him grievous self-doubt and zapping him of all strength. So the first thing that he needs is sustenance and the next prescription is rest. He eats and lays down and then he journey’s for forty days to a sacred place of refuge and after a night of rest in the sheltering womb of a cave on the very mountain of God, he is asked a most haunting and demanding question, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

It is an engaging and ponderous question to ask ourselves as Canadians as our nation has been poised to host the world leaders at the G20 Summit. And should our politicians not be asking of themselves as leaders and as nations of the world, "What are you doing, here?" Should our military generals overseeing the action in Afghanistan and Iraq not be asking the question, "What are you doing, here?" Should the executives of BP not be asking it of themselves, and their shareholders and a world economy based on profit, "What are you doing, here?" And should not the members of every church congregation and churchly court also be putting the measure of discipleship under the microscope and asking self and constituency "What are you doing here?"

Are we instilling fear or encouraging peace? Are we like Jezebel and the wider community of the Gerasenes concerned most with self and the future and our own ease? Do we look righteousness in the face and levy threats? Are we like Elijah ready to throw up our hands and quit because the demands of discipleship may mean that our lives are lonely and misunderstood and open to criticism? Are we like the Gerasenes community tolerating and allowing one to live naked and dirty and in chains so that we might live our lives free from accountability or calls to justice and equality? Are we like the transformed demoniac sitting in our right mind and ready to go forward with the agent of transformation only to be told to stay where you are as a beacon and example and exercise your ministry of discipleship among your peers who knew you once as a very different person?

Can you even imagine how devastatingly challenging it would be to stay among those who have kept you in chains your whole life-even if it was for your own protection and theirs- and be an example of the power of God at work in Christ? Would it not be easier and invoke fewer questions to be a part of the entourage and to travel among those persons and communities who know you only as you are now-one of Christ's disciples and not the former raging lunatic? But for the transformed demoniac and for Elijah the prophet the way forward was to go back.

Perhaps the screw up in lectionary readings was coincidence, but there seems an engaging ripple effect that on the last Sunday in June, before summer vacation separates us from staff and one another, the question that we are left to ponder through the dog days of summer is “What are you doing, here?” May God grace us with strength and courage to ponder the question even as we seek the sustenance and rest for the journey ahead. Amen.