

Scripture and Sermon for June 19, 2016

1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a

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 for 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." Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus...."

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.

Let us pray...Amen.

Well, there's no getting around it: both our Hebrew scripture and our Gospel lesson this morning are disturbing and violent. In my early days as a preacher, I might have avoided both of these readings altogether, and gone with something safe, something soothing, something we could all agree was a comfort to God's faithful in the midst of upheaval and tragedy.

But not now. Not today. Last week, at this time, the media had not quite caught up with the facts of the mass killing in Orlando, Florida, so some of us were aware of a crisis, but many of us did not have the whole, heart-

wrenching story. And now we do. And, as we turn to God's holy Word for wisdom and comfort, we have to hear about a revered Jewish prophet turned killer, and a Savior who destroys a herd of pigs to eliminate evil spirits troubling a man from Galilee.

In our passage from 1 Kings, we hear how the prophet Elijah, having killed the false prophets of Baal, was running for his life from Jezebel, who had promised to do the same to him for his deeds. King Ahab and Jezebel employed the priests of Baal, and they worshiped Baal, and we recall from last week's scripture that these false prophets failed to prove their god was stronger than the God of Elijah. Elijah proved that the one God could start a sacrificial fire, even with the wood and altar soaked in water.

When he realized that Jezebel was intent on killing him, he escaped to Mt. Horeb, the same mountain where Moses met God. While up there, God asked him why he was there, and Elijah responded that he was a faithful and zealous servant of God, the only one left after the Israelites had killed all the other prophets.

God knew this was a lie, and God directed Elijah to go outside of the cave he was in because the Lord was about to pass by.

God passed by, and there was a great wind, so great it broke the rock into pieces. There was an earthquake, and there was a fire. But our scripture tells us that God was not in the wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire. In the silence, in the aftermath of the wind, the earthquake, and the fire, God's voice asked Elijah once again, why was he there.

And Elijah lied again. The most revered prophet of the people of Israel was a killer, and a liar. God told Elijah to go on his way to the wilderness. And he did.

So what are we to make of this story? How are we to put this in context? What does it mean for our understanding of the roots of our Christian faith, and what does it mean for our understanding of the Creator God?

At the heart of this passage is an astoundingly comforting concept: God is not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, not in the killing, not in the impulses and actions that take our loved ones. God does not cause these things, and God does not allow them to happen.

I know that these things fly in the face of stuff we say to make ourselves feel better, it directly contradicts 'everything happens for a reason', at least as far as God goes. Everything *does* happen for a reason, that reason is that God has instilled free will into human-kind since the dawn of time. That means that each and every human on earth can choose how to believe, and how to act.

This story forces us to see that God is not some puppet master, some behind the scenes manipulator. God's still, small voice in the aftermath of violence and death is a constant, but we can't continue to think that God causes the death of little children in Florida lagoons from alligators any more than God causes the death of 49 innocent people in a bar from self-loathing killers.

Does this line of thinking make you a little uncomfortable? That's ok. I was a little uncomfortable at first too. But hear me out: if we insist on thinking about God as an all-powerful, all-seeing, in control of everything Creator God, then we have some challenges: why does God allow tragedies to occur? Why is evil allowed to have any traction?

But if we see God as the originator of free will for humanity, the one who set humanity in motion with the freedom to act on our own, if we see the

Creator God as less powerful to make things happen in the universe, we free ourselves from the tortured logic of why bad things happen.

Now, I'm not looking for an easy theological answer for the tragic and violent events that seem to be occurring with disturbing regularity. I *am* rejecting any voice that says that victims of violence somehow deserved their fate. I'm trying to get at the heart of our relationship with the Creator God whose still, small voice helps us in times of deep grief and horror.

In the vacuum of horror after a tragic event, God is there. God is in the vigils, the outpouring of emotion and grief, God is in the comfort and care of those who mourn, God is in the impulse to make the world better after senseless violence shocks us.

God is in our healing when we lose a loved one suddenly, and God is in the energy we find when we act to make the world better in their memory.

You all know me well enough now to know that I have a later in life fascination with science. I regret not paying more attention in high school, but there are so many things being discovered by scientists about our universe, from new periodic elements being created by particle colliders, to gravitational waves made by colliding black holes. But everything that science knows about the universe, from the smallest quantum particle to the largest celestial body known to humanity, proves that there are limits to how things behave. The laws of physics, the laws of the universe, include limits.

I'm saying that our Creator God has set some limits as well. And our God is limited in the way God acts in the universe. God has chosen to let humanity act freely, and has chosen to be in the comfort and in the healing after tragedies, to be in the forgiveness that comes from deep discernment

and introspection, and God has chosen to use people like Elijah, flawed and limited, to be instruments of peace, to spread God's holy Word.

God did not use Omar Mateen as an instrument of wrath, God does not use individuals who commit violence as pawns to make a point. God walks with us on our journey, on our grief journey, into the wilderness, into the unknown. God may know everything, but God can't control everything.

And I'm ok with that. God has thick skin, so to speak, and can take our anger, take our hurt, take whatever we can dish out when we're mad at God, but at the end of the day, God walks beside us anyway, and sets us on our journey, just like Elijah.

We may have been gifted with free will from the Divine Creator, but our very nature is inclined towards healing, even in the most painful of situations. Like the Emanuel church in South Carolina, where a gunman killed 9 church members, including the pastor, while they were in a bible study. That happened a year ago. The entire church has come out to tell the world they have forgiven the killer. God did not cause their grief, could not prevent the killer from acting, but God walks with that congregation every day on their grief journey towards healing.

Personal confession time: when I hear about such tragedies, such violent and horrible events like in Orlando, I feel helpless. I can pray, and I do, I can hope, and I do, but the only thing I feel I can do in the wake of such evil is to love my family, to raise our children to bring good into the world, to be forgivers, to be doers of God's Word, and not just hearers of the Word.

Because sometimes these things are just too big, too monstrous, too overwhelming. Stories like the one in 1 Kings help me put things in perspective: God is not in the killing, not even in the impulse to kill, God is

in the tears and the heart-wrenching cries of those who mourn, just as God is in the impulse to make the world better in the aftermath of such things.

Elijah, a prophet of our God, wasn't given a free pass for killing the prophets of Baal, and he wasn't given a free pass for lying to God: Jewish tradition and custom tells us that Elijah is forced to attend every circumcision for eternity in order to atone for his sins.

But in my heart, I know that our God is a forgiving God, especially since Jesus came and lived among us, was crucified, and was resurrected.

God doesn't tell us to do bad things, we have the freedom to make those choices on our own. But when we come to a place of contrition, when we repent of our bad decisions, when we ask for forgiveness with integrity and faith, God forgives us.

God doesn't cause bad things to happen. But when they do, God is right there with us, in our shock, in our numbness, in our anger, and in our mourning.

God urges us toward healing, toward forgiveness, toward reconciliation, toward life, toward love. Let us go on our way towards those things.
Amen.