

Last Sunday After The Epiphany
Pastor Michael D. Archer

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I've made no secret of my growing love for the Lectionary. This is one of those days when I wish I had twenty minutes to talk about each one of these readings. You're glad I don't, to be sure, but I am going to try and connect the dots between the Old Testament reading from 1st Kings and our Gospel reading for this morning.

In both cases, God looked at the world and saw a glaring need, a need for a more complete awareness of God. It was a confusing time. Israel no longer recognized God as God. In the Old Testament reading we find that the people of Israel, now under the leadership of King Ahab, have accepted not only the God of Moses but they were worshipping other Gods. There was God and there was the Gods of Asherah. Ahab, who was now king over Israel, the word says, was more wicked, did more evil in the sight of the Lord than any King who had preceded him. You might imagine that the people of Israel, likened most to follow a King, took their cues from the leadership of that King, and as Ahab did evil in the eyes of the Lord so Israel wandered from their God.

But as God often does, God chooses to address the confusion of the world through people, through his servants. And yet, as we are all too aware, most of us who have been called to be ambassadors of God, to be the revealers of the true God in our world, are very imperfect people. Anyone here perfect? None of us are perfect and Elijah is no exception. Now the snap shot that we have is really at the tail end of this story and so I want to set the stage a bit for where we find Elijah as he's here in this cave grumbling and complaining before God.

You might recall Ahab has been an evil King, so God decides I'm going to use my Prophet Elijah to try to turn my people around. Ahab doesn't listen to Elijah and so God decides there needs to be a more dramatic object lesson. There needs to be something that will get the attention of the people of Israel and so he brings about a drought and this drought lasts for three years. Elijah is sent away by God. I want you the just disappear, go off by this brook that the Lord directs Elijah to go to and there he says: "You'll drink from the brook and you'll be fed by the ravens." God took care of Elijah, all the while there was no rain in Israel.

It comes time for Elijah to return and to confront Ahab once again. And as he confronts Ahab, making a longer story shorter, through Obidiah, Ahab finally is confronted by Elijah and he says to Elijah: "Who are you, you troubler of Israel is that you". Elijah turns the tables and says: "Its not I who is the troubler, it is you

Ahab, for you've led the people, God's people, away from God". He sets up this powerful confrontation on Mount Carmel, if you remember that story and Elijah proposes a test. He says: "Gather all the Prophets of Baal and let's have this test. We'll build two altars. The Prophets of Baal will build an altar to their God and I will restore the altar to the Lord. And we'll prepare sacrifices and we'll put our Gods to the test. We'll pray and whoever answers, whichever God answers by fire, that will be the true God.

Elijah allows the prophets of Baal to go first. They begin to pray in the morning, they pray through noon, they pray into the evening and obviously there is no fire. Elijah begins to taunt them: "Well maybe your God's away on vacation. Maybe your God is just too busy. Maybe your God is taking care of some personal needs and He's not listening to you." Then finally Elijah decides enough is enough. He repairs the altar of the Lord. And not only does he repair the altar and prepare the sacrifice, but he adds a little drama to this. He asks men to bring three barrels of water. They've dug a trench around the altar and they pour these three barrels of water over the sacrifice so that the water drips off of the sacrifice into the trench, fills the trench, and then Elijah prays: "So that these your people will know that you are God, answer with fire." The fire falls from heaven, consumes the sacrifice, licks up all of the water in the trench around the altar, and the people of Israel fall on their face humbled, for they now know Elijah's God is the true God, no more is there confusion in Israel.

You might imagine Elijah is bolstered by this. He's been used by God in a powerful way. Ahab, I failed to mention, not only was an evil King, but he had a perfect counterpart in his Queen, Jezebel. You've heard of Jezebel? Well Ahab sets off in his chariot and he's headed back to Israel where he's going to fill Jezebel in on all that's happened. He gets back, he begins to talk to Jezebel about all the things that Elijah has done, and Jezebel is not a happy woman. She lets Elijah know: "By this time tomorrow Elijah, you're going to be just like one of these other dead Prophets." I failed to mention that all of the Prophets of Baal had been slaughtered after the showdown on Mount Carmel. Elijah, this man who has stood up in front of 450 Prophets, stood up before the entire nation of Israel with great boldness to proclaim that there is one God, now confronted with this angry woman turns and runs. I'll not belabor that point, but I may come back to it in a moment.

Here's Elijah, he's escaped and he's here in this cave. He's despondent: "Look God, you wanted me to do these great things, and you did these great things, and now Jezebel is going to have me just like one of the dead Prophets. I'm all alone,

woe is me.” He’s instructed to go out to the mouth of the cave because the Lord is about to pass by. Our reading tells us that there was a wind, but the Lord was not in the wind; there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. Then there was the sound of sheer silence and in the silence the word of the Lord was heard. That word to Elijah was one of encouragement: “You are not alone, you think you’re alone, but you’re not really alone. I really do have this under control Elijah.” And God instructs Elijah to turn around, to go back where he came from and continue the work that God had called him to do. It was in that place of retreat, where the voice of God could be truly heard, that Elijah was able to see and understand God in a new way and take that fresh revelation back to the people of Israel.

Our Gospel reading for this morning is the story of the Transfiguration. Here Peter, James and John have been taken with Jesus up to Mount Horeb, a retreat of sorts. If you read the Gospel accounts leading up to this, there have been some amazing things that have taken place. Jesus has been teaching great truths, He’s been healing the sick, He’s raised the dead. If you recall in Matthews gospel before this, there’s even the account of Jesus coming out on the water while the Disciples are in the boat, Jesus comes walking to them on the water. Its very clear to the Disciples that this Jesus is not an ordinary man. And yet they failed to see that this Jesus was really God.

A confusing time. The world was confused about who God really was and the church was not doing a very good job of reflecting the true character of God. There were the Pharisees who were the keepers of the law. They had taken the Mosaic Law and added to it. It was job security. They were the lawyers of their day. They were not only the keepers of the law, they were the interpreters of the law and to the Mosaic Law there were now more than 600 Commands that they had added. The people of Israel needed them. But God could see that the people of Israel were starting to recognize God as only a God of rules, a God who was careful about seeing that every I was dotted and every T crossed in their lives. Jesus came to that culture to say: “That’s not the God I represent. The God I want to share with you is a God of love and He simplified all of those commandments with two: To Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself.”

Peter, James and John were among the Disciples who saw Jesus as a great man, but not maybe recognizing Him as Devine. Here on the Mount of Transfiguration, they suddenly are confronted with this powerful, powerful happening. There is the radiance from Christ that is like nothing they had ever seen before and standing

with Jesus are Moses and Elijah. Peter, James and John are on their face because they heard this voice coming from the crowds: "This is my son." They could no longer look at Jesus in the same way again.

Were we to take time this morning we could probably all share stories of where we have encountered the Divine and had no doubt that we were in the presence of God. Such was the case for Peter, James and John, and they did what most of us would do in a time like that. They just wanted to stay. Let's just stay here. This is really wonderful; we're experiencing God. Let's build three tabernacles. One to Moses, one to Elijah, one to you Jesus. We'll just stay in this holy place. But that was not going to answer the problems of the world. They, just like Elijah, were sent back. They came down from the mountain to continue the work, but only now with a fresh revelation of God.

You and I live in a world that today is very confused. A world that does not see God as God truly is. Huston Smith in his book "The Soul of Christianity", lays much of that blame at the feet of the church. We who are to be the ambassadors of Christ in our world, we who are to be the representatives of God in our world, he says: "On one hand you have conservative fundamentalists who really (he doesn't say this) but are no better than the Pharisees. Who depict God as a God of rules and regulations and just waiting for us to mess up so that we can be punished. That's not an accurate depiction of God. But, he says, on the other hand you've got liberal Christianity who simply want to make relationship with God all about just being good people. And we loose somewhere in the midst of this, between the extremes the reality that God is a very real God who wants a personal relationship with all of us; a relationship that is not only in his heart, but is very possible. God uses imperfect people still to carry the message of who God is into our world.

I mentioned in the story of the Transfiguration that these men, Peter, James and John, went back down the mountain and they were used to spread this news, but they were not perfect still. They were still very imperfect messengers of this truth. The Apostle Paul writes that we have this treasure, the presence of God's spirit in earthen vessels, in cracked pots if you will, to demonstrate that this all surpassing power is from God and not from men. God still wants to reveal His true character through imperfect people. I mentioned that same Peter who was bold on that day on the Mount of Transfiguration and who would be bold later at the Last Supper, and proclaiming that he would be with Christ even if it meant his own life. On the night that Jesus was betrayed and tried, he denied this Jesus three times before a little maiden girl.

If there are young men here, there's a very important lesson in both of these two stories. Elijah is running from Jezebel. Peter is backing down from this little maiden girl. Learn this lesson young men, women are scary. Facing a determined woman is not for the faint of heart. Nor is taking the true revelation of the God we serve into a confused world. But that God will be revealed through us as we are faithful and available. It may mean that we take those times of retreat, just as Elijah in the cave, and Peter, James and John with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, a place where they could discover this fresh revelation of God. Where might that be? For some of us, we know that small groups are a place where we can encounter in a smaller setting this intimate God, and take that revelation back into our world.

During this Lenten season we will have the opportunity to be a part of small groups. If you are not in one already, I encourage you to be a part of one, to join one, at least during these six weeks of Lent. It's a great opportunity to be in the presence of people who are on the same journey you are on, and discover the fresh revelation of God. The confused world in which we live needs to see this fresh revelation of God. And as we are faithful to take those times to be quiet and still and allow God to reveal Himself to us anew, we can be instruments for removing the confusion in our world. May we do so for to the glory of God in Jesus' name.