

THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: PROPER 7

June 20, 2010

I want to acknowledge the insight of Peter J. Gomes in his essay "The Question at the Mouth of the Cave," in his book Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living: "He (Elijah) reminds us of a lesson that all of us in this achievement-orientated, results-oriented world need to know - that failure is not the opposite of success; it is often the result of success."

1 Kings 19:1-15a

Luke 7:36-8:3

We just finished a fabulous week of Vacation Bible School. Alternating each summer between St. Timothy's and here, this year was our turn to provide the gathering space. Our closing session was awesome! The children's excitement was contagious. I loved watching the smiling, proud faces of parents and grandparents as the children sang many of the songs they learned during the week. They were gathered under the branches of the baobob tree right smack in the middle of our parish hall, 'grown' just for this occasion by one of our resident artists! The baobob tree is a gigantic tree found in Africa that can grow to 98 feet tall and 36 feet wide. It serves as a meeting place for people to gather - and at Vacation Bible School this year, called "Baobob Blast," the tree was the hub of much activity and energy, such as we experienced at the closing session Friday morning.

There's another tree I'd like to talk about today - and it's the one under which Elijah finds himself while fleeing for his life. It's the 'broom tree.' It's not one of Elijah's best moments, to say the least. Queen Jezebel is out to kill him. He's scared. He's tired. He's alone. He feels defeated. And it seems as if he's lost his faith. He's so depressed that he sits under the broom tree praying that God would take his life. And he does what any of us are prone to do when we're really depressed. He goes to sleep.

Somehow it doesn't seem to matter in that moment that he was a pretty successful servant of the Lord. Elijah had done a good job of following God's directions. God's power was manifested through him in very significant ways. He had confronted the king about changing his ways and when the king didn't listen, Elijah predicted a drought and it was painfully dry for three years. It took no small amount of courage then, as it does now, to 'speak truth to power,' but Elijah did it - and then ran off to a secluded place in order to avoid the king. But God always knows how to find us, especially prophets, and Elijah is sent by God to Zarephath where, as we heard two weeks ago, he meets a widow who offers him hospitality. Quite unexpectedly, her son dies while Elijah is a guest in her house and Elijah brings him back to life through God's power at work through him. Then the king finds him and Elijah once again is in the midst of a confrontation, this time with the prophets of Baal. He challenges them to battle and he wins. He prayed for rain to do away with the drought, and his prayer is answered. He should have been pleased with himself, perhaps thinking about retirement and writing his memoirs, but instead he feels as if he's been a failure. He can't see, as a tired and discouraged prophet, that failure is often the price of success and that he needed to let God do for him what Elijah couldn't do for himself. He needed healing strength in a time of darkness. He

needed God spirit to renew and replenish his soul. And so, while sitting under the broom tree, he is awakened by an angel who provides food and drink to strengthen him for a journey God wanted him to take to Mount Horeb where he gets further directions from God.

We never think of Elijah the prophet when we think of people who have hit rock bottom, do we? It certainly isn't a Bible story I've turned to in the past when it comes to being with people who are discouraged or fearful or doubtful about where they are in their lives because of the circumstances in which they find themselves. This part of Elijah's story is relevant for us today. There are people we know who are sitting beneath their broom trees. People who have suffered loss of all sorts: loss of a job, loss of a spouse through divorce or loss through death, or there's a sickness, or there's a grief; or there's a disappointment or profound hurt from children; or from parents, as the case may be. Or maybe there are struggles with addiction or alcoholism. Just look at some of the petitions in our Prayers of the People and you can see that we pray for people sitting underneath broom trees all the time. Just yesterday morning, I met a man at Cornerstone Missionary Baptist Church who had sat under a broom tree for 15 years. He told me that he's "a living example that mistakes happen." Shabaka spent 13 years on death row due to the false testimony and a personal grudge from someone he turned in for robbery. He came within 13 hours of being executed by the state of Florida for a crime he did not commit. He can't get back the years he lost but he puts his outrage to work by helping people in their struggles, especially troubled youth. He's come back to life in a new way and speaks today as a person of faith against the death penalty because he feels there are too many folks like himself, sitting on death row for crimes they haven't committed.

Elijah ran and ran and ran. He ran from Jezebel. And he ran as well from himself. It was in the stillness beneath the broom tree; and especially later on at Mount Horeb when he hears the word of the Lord asking him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" that Elijah experiences anew the healing presence of God. His strength is renewed to do God's work, not his, that God called Elijah to do.

There's a poem by Grace Noll Crowell entitled: "For One Who is Tired," which perhaps captures the essence of Elijah's experience of sitting under the broom tree, which led to his journey to Mount Horeb where he encountered God's presence within him. It goes like this:

*Dear child, God does not say,
'Today, be strong.'
God knows your strength is spent,
God knows how long the road has been;
How weary you have grown.
For he who walked the earthly roads alone,
Each bogging lowland and each rugged hill,
Can understand, and so he says, 'Be still
And know that I am God,' The hour is late
And you must rest awhile; and you must wait
Until life's empty reservoirs fill up
As slow rains fill an empty, upturned cup.
Hold up your cup, dear child, for God to fill.
God only asks today that you be still.*

It's a good metaphor to picture. It's starting to rain after a long dry period. Turn your cup upside-down and slowly, drop by drop, it begins to fill again. Those who are hurting, grieving, in sorrow, or

just struggling with something that can't be fixed or controlled, the story of Elijah says that maybe we just need to sit awhile and rest, and turn our cup upside-down to God, and little by little, let your dry reservoir fill up again.

"What are you doing here?" God asks Elijah more than once in the journey which led him from feeling so alone and empty to an experience of receiving anew the healing power of God's presence.

"What are you doing here?" could easily have been the question Jesus asks the poor guy in today's gospel he meets on his journey through the country of the Gerasenes. It's a peculiar story with some rather bizarre details Luke records, but his point is to show God's healing power at work in Jesus - and that the call to discipleship can potentially transform even the most unlikely of people.

It's a question we might ask ourselves this morning: "What are we doing here?" Some of us here this morning may find ourselves underneath a broom tree, or we know a loved one who is - and we're not able to do much to change their situation. But what we can do is be still, listen to God speaking to our hearts, be nourished and strengthened at the Lord's table - and hold up our cup, trusting God to fill it.

Amen.

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