

9th Sunday of Ordinary Time

I Kings 18:20-39; Psalm 96; Luke 7:1-10; Galatians 1:1-12

The Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time? Why would this not be the Second Sunday (with Trinity Sunday being the first Sunday) of this season of the Christian Year?

One of the peculiarities of the Christian Year is the fact that it has both fixed dates (e.g., Christmas) and adjustable dates (e.g., Easter). That, in turn, creates a significant timing problem for the entire Christian Year.

Easter is a moveable date. It is determined by the Pascal Full Moon (or the date of the full moon in the latter part of March or in early April). Thus, Easter can fall on any Sunday between March 21 and April 25. This irregular date then skews the dates for the beginning of Lent (40 days earlier, not counting Sundays) and the end of Eastertide (50 days after Easter). That, in turn, impacts the start of the season of Ordinary Time.

But the beginning of the Christian Year – the first Sunday in Advent – is fixed by Christmas always falling on December 25. How, then, does Ordinary Time get from a movable calendar skewed by an Easter that changes each year, back to a fixed calendar that must be in place so that Advent (the beginning of the Christian Year) can begin four Sundays before Christmas Day (December 25)? This is how it occurs.

The designation of the date for Easter in any given year determines the beginning of Lent. Therefore, the period between Epiphany (January 6) and the beginning of Lent is computed. The Sundays between the Sunday after Epiphany and the Sunday before Ash Wednesday (the beginning of Lent) are counted as “Ordinary Sundays” (those Sundays can either be designated as “Ordinary Time” Sundays or as “Sundays after Epiphany” – the alternative we choose). Then, the date for Trinity Sunday (the beginning Sunday of the “Ordinary Time” season) is determined, because it, too, is skewed according to when Easter has occurred that year. Those two calculations will then give you the fixed Sunday within the season of Ordinary Time that the Ordinary Time schedule should begin. That, in turn, gets you on the fixed schedule that will make all things right for the beginning of Advent and the beginning of a new Christian Year.

So, although it would seem that this Sunday ought to be the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, it is according to this adjusted calendar, actually the Ninth Sunday. And so, everything else in the schedule is made right when we name it as the Ninth, rather than the Second Sunday.

Would that everything else in the world or in the church could be made right so easily!

I Kings 18:20-21, 30-39 is one of the most dramatic stories in the Bible that deals with the task of God’s people toward those who hold the political, economic and religious power within their country. To fully appreciate this story, one must place it within its context.

King Ahab ruled over Israel from c. 869-950 BCE, and was a man obsessed with power. His marriage to Jezebel, the daughter of the king of the Sidonians and priest of Asherah (I Kings

16:31) and his consequent willingness to allow her to bring Ba'al worship (Asherah or Astarte was the consort of Ba'al) and priests of Ba'al into the court, guaranteed that Ahab's reign would be marked by syncretism. As a result of wanting to please his wife, Ahab built a house of worship for Ba'al in his capital city of Samaria and erected an altar there (16:32-33), so that Ba'al worship was no longer confined to the court but was available to all Israelites who wished to take advantage of it.

But Ahab was more than an advocate of Ba'al. To truly understand his motives, one must recognize what monarchy was supposed to be in Israel. Deuteronomy names two systems for ordering the public life of Israel: the judicial system and the monarchy. Deuteronomy is the book that best presents the office of the king to Israel.¹ In essence, Deuteronomy significantly limits the rights and privileges of the king of Israel so that he is seen as a vice regent under Israel's true king, Yahweh (Deut. 17:14-20). In all nations other than Israel, the king was an absolute monarch, the sole voice of authority in the land. There was no other authority but his, because he was a total despot. The judiciary was an instrument of the king, adjudicating the laws he himself had set, and adjudicating those laws in ways that would favor the king.

The king was allowed such power by nobles and common people alike in most nations contemporary with Israel because he was seen as the incarnation (as in Egypt) or manifestation (as in Assyria and Babylonia) of that nation's chief god. The king was their god "enfleshed". The king controlled not only the political life of the nation, but its religious and economic life as well. He operated under the assumption that all the wealth of the land belonged to him. And it belonged to him because he was a god, and not a man! Therefore, the king was, in his single person, the religious, political and economic systems personified.

Israelite kingship, as defined by Deuteronomy, was profoundly different. The king was to be a commoner, an ordinary person whom God would select to be monarch. His reign could not be passed on to his heirs. Rather, each new monarch would be chosen from the people. The reward of the Israelite king for wisely ruling his nation was not to accumulate wealth for himself or his family or tribe. He was to live frugally. He was not to have a harem or many wives. He was not to enslave his subjects or sell them into slavery to another king. Finally, he was to keep a copy of the book of the Law before him and have a portion of it read each day to him in order to remind himself of his obligations and responsibilities as a king (not his privileges). Israelite kingship, as described in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, was unlike any monarchy existing anywhere else in the Middle East.

Deuteronomy communicated to those in the political system that the system exists to dispense justice. The judiciary is to be separate from the authority of the king so that it can adjudicate cases with justice (and not enforce the king's agenda). For the monarch, justice is to be the inevitable result of rulership that exists to serve the people, and he is not to perceive the nation as

¹ For the past 200 years, there has been great disagreement between biblical scholars regarding the dating of the book of Deuteronomy. That dating covers a spectrum from 1200 BCE to 622 BCE (the latter date is the date when the "Book of the Law" – or, in other words, Deuteronomy – was uncovered in the Temple (see II Kings 22:3-20); therefore, the book obviously existed before its discovery). According to the dating one chooses (I personally prefer a 900 BCE date for its creation), Deuteronomy either prescribes or describes Israel's common understanding of the office of the king. What is significant, however, is that Israel's kings ruled under this understanding of their reign as being that of a vice-regent of Yahweh, likely as far back as David himself.

his personal property or domain for him to use to further his own ends or increase his wealth. A nation and culture built on relationship with Yahweh and each other requires a government that will seek justice in all it does.

This was not an understanding of kingship that Ahab intended to embrace. Although he gave lip service to this understanding of king as servant to the nation, his actions were all carefully calculated to enable him to rule as an oriental despot. And in no arena of the life of the nation was this more obvious than in his actions in regards to religion.

Ahab realized that it was from their religion that the people of Israel believed that the king existed to legislate and implement justice in the nation that would seek everybody's good and not just his own. It was their belief in Yahweh and in Yahweh as a relational and just God who was their true king (reducing the king to a vice-regent) that would cause the Israelites to place upon the king expectations and limiting conditions that no other monarch in the Middle East had to bear. If Ahab were ever to rule Israel as a total despot, he had to destroy the religious foundations of Israel. And that meant demonstrating that it was Ba'al and not Yahweh who was supreme in Israel. And that, in turn, meant dealing decisively with Elijah the Tishbite.

Elijah was the outstanding voice for Yahweh both before the people and before the court of Israel. He quickly discerned Ahab's intentions and immediately set to work to undermine the king's actions. He knew that Ahab intended to ignore all the laws of Israel regarding the limitation of the monarchy in his quest to become a despot. He realized that Ahab recognized that he could not do so without destroying the foundation of Yahweh worship in Israel. And so Elijah decided to publicly challenge Ahab to a contest that would prove, once and for all, which god ruled Israel.

Ahab is in a public place when Elijah confronts him, so that what is said is said before the people and consequently can't be withdrawn. Ahab's first reaction when seeing Elijah is to say, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" Elijah shoots back, "I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord (i.e., disobeyed the political requirements of Deuteronomy) and followed the Ba'als. Now therefore have all Israel assemble before me at Mount Carmel, with the four hundred fifty prophets of Ba'al and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table (i.e., are in the court leading Ba'al worship and undermining Yahweh's authority)" (18:17-19).

So they assemble on Mount Carmel – the 850 priests of Ba'al and Asherah, versus one single prophet of Yahweh, Elijah – and Ahab and "all the people". Elijah places the challenge. "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If Yahweh is God, follow him. But if Ba'al is god, follow him! Let two bulls be given to us; let the priests of Ba'al choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire on it. Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of Yahweh. Then, the god who answers by fire is indeed God" (18:21-28)!

And why would it be that "the god who answers by fire is indeed God"? Both Yahweh and Ba'al were "fire gods". That is, the worshipper of Ba'al believed that Ba'al controlled thunder, lightning, and storms. And Yahweh had made his presence known to Israel both in a burning

bush and in a law code given to the people from the midst of a burning mountain (Exodus 3:1-6; 20:1-19). So Elijah's challenge struck at the core of the supposed power of both gods.

The contest is now joined. The priests of Ba'al and Asherah go first. As agreed to, they pick a bull, build an altar, slay the beast and lay it upon the wood. Then they begin to pray to Ba'al to accept their offering with fire. They pray and pray and pray for Ba'al to respond. For six hours, they pray to Ba'al. They pray, they plead, they cut themselves, they practice self-flagellation; they do everything they can think of to get Ba'al to answer by fire (18:26-29). And nothing happens!

Elijah isn't above publicly mocking them and making them look like fools. "Cry aloud", he cries. "Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened; maybe he has wandered away" (vs. 27). Myths of Ba'al present him as deep in reflection ("he is meditating"), traveling to the underworld ("he is on a journey") and even dying and coming back to life ("he is asleep and must be awakened"), so Elijah is mockingly "de-mythologizing" those beliefs about Ba'al, showing them as false. But then he adds insult to injury; "maybe he has wandered away", he declares (and everybody likely gasped at his effrontery). You see, to "wander away" was a polite euphemism for one relieving himself. Therefore, Elijah is saying, "Maybe your god had to go take a crap!"

The priests of Ba'al "raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation (3:00 p.m.), but there was no voice, no answer, and no response"! Ba'al had not responded to his priests' desperate cry for help.

Now it is Elijah's turn. He simply says to the people, "Come closer to me". The people (and likely even Ahab and the disgraced priests of Ba'al) gather around him to see what he would do. He first repairs the altar to Yahweh that was on Mount Carmel, that altar that had been destroyed by the Ba'al worshippers as a way of claiming the land for Ba'al. He uses twelve stones in that stacking of a restored altar, obviously representing the Israelite kingdom built upon the twelve tribes of Israel living in fealty to their true king, Yahweh. Then he digs a deep trench around the altar, puts wood on the altar, slays the bull, cuts it in pieces and lays it upon the altar. The sacrifice is now ready for the contest.

But first, Elijah has the people gather four large jars with water and pour it on the sacrifice – not once, but three times "so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water" (vs. 35). Thoroughly inundated, there was no way this sacrifice was going to burn! And then Elijah prayed one, simple, quiet prayer.

"O Yahweh, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O Yahweh, answer me, so that this people may know that it is you, O Yahweh, who is God, and that you have turned their hearts back" (vs. 36). It is nothing but a short, simple and quiet prayer – only two sentences long. But, immediately, the fire falls from heaven, consumes the burnt offering, burns up all the wood and even the stones, and even "licks up the water in the trench".

“And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and cried, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God” (vs. 39). The Hebrew is even stronger – even though terribly ungrammatical. The people actually cried, “Yahweh, he is the God; Yahweh, he is the God”!

The contest had been joined. Yahweh had won. Ba'al had lost. And with the loss of Ba'al, so Ahab and Jezebel had lost. This defeat didn't stop Ahab's efforts to sabotage Israel's understanding of kingship. But he would never attempt to destroy Yahweh worship again. Instead, he “came out of the closet” and openly manipulated and sought to control Israel's economic and political practices (e.g., I Kings 20:1-34; 21:1-26) in order to build as much power as possible for himself. But Israel would never return so thoroughly to Ba'al worship as they once had under Ahab, because it was now indisputable to them that “Yahweh, he is the god; Yahweh, he is the god!”

Psalm 96 is directed to the praise of God. It stresses the creator role of God, which in turn, stresses the universality of God rather than his tribal emphasis. It presents God as a monarch, sitting in judgment (i.e., acting as a judge) towards his people, who “is coming to judge the earth, he will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth” (96:13).

Psalm 96 praises God in a way that centers on God's liberating action for all the nations of the world. “O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods” (96:1-4).

It is traditional for Psalm 96 to be used both for Trinity Sunday and for Christmas Eve. That is so because it reminds us that God is acting to do a new thing. And that new action is one of the bringing of truth, liberation and judgment upon the earth (according to what is appropriate), an action that “tells of his salvation from day to day, his glory among the nations”. “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those with whom he is well pleased!”

Luke 7:1-10 deals with the question, “What is the extent of God's love? How wide is it?” In this story of Jesus' healing of a Roman centurion's servant, it is part of a much larger story of Jesus' mission as framed by Luke.

In Luke 4:16-30, Jesus presents his mission as bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to captives, recovering the sight of the blind, setting free the oppressed and proclaiming the advent of God's new economic order (the jubilee). The result of that proclamation of his mission is that the peasants hear him gladly while the powerful religious and political leaders seek to eliminate him.

Luke then develops further how Jesus is executing his effort to bring liberation to Israel's poor both through word and deed (4:31—6:11), and in the Sermon on the Plain (meant to parallel Matthew's Sermon on the Mount). In that sermon, Jesus presents the new values and commitments (“blessed are you poor”, “blessed are you when people exclude, revile and defame

you on account of me”, “woe to you when all speak well of you”) upon which God’s kingdom will be built (6:12-49). Then Luke moves into three magnificent stories (7:1-10, 7:11-17; 7:36-50) that embody the salvation Jesus is bringing to humanity through Jubilee. We will examine each of these three stories over the next three Sundays.

In the story of Jesus’ healing of a Roman centurion’s servant (7:1-10), we are introduced to a remarkable Gentile (in fact, all centurions mentioned in the New Testament are people of character, in contrast to the Jewish authorities [Luke 7:4; 23:47; Acts 10:2; 27:43]). This centurion’s slave is ill and close to death. The centurion, greatly troubled by his slave’s condition sees the miracle-working Jesus as the means for healing his slave. But he feels he is not of sufficient status to come himself and plead his case (that is, he is a Gentile asking a Jew for help). So he has some Jewish elders come to plead his case. That these leading men among the Jews would agree to plead for him is an indication in what respect this Gentile centurion was held (“he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us”). So these Jewish leaders come to Jesus to plead this centurion’s case.

Jesus agrees to come with them to heal the servant. But he doesn’t need to do that. The centurion sends some “friends” with this message, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But speak the word, and let my servant be healed” (7:6-7).

These words reveal the profound faith of this centurion, and his utter trust in the integrity of Jesus. And because it so beautifully captures the essence of faith, that prayer has become a part of the celebration of the Eucharist in many Christian liturgical traditions. But it was what this centurion next said that, though obscure, most particularly captures his great faith.

“For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it” (7:8).

In other words, the centurion is saying to Jesus, “I am a man set by Rome to be under its authority and therefore to dispense that authority. And when, as a man under authority, I give a command, I expect it to be obeyed. You, too, are a man under the authority of God. As such, when you command, you expect to be obeyed. If you will command this illness to leave my servant – even if you are miles away – that illness will obey you and my servant will be healed! I believe that with all my heart.”

And Luke tells us, “When Jesus heard this he was amazed at (the centurion), and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith”” (7:9)! Therefore, just as the centurion postulated, his servant was immediately healed, though miles away.

Only twice in the gospel accounts does it tell us that Jesus “was amazed” at someone – in this incident, as he marvels at the faith of a Gentile and in Mark 6:6, when he is amazed at the unbelief of the people in Nazareth.

The question with which we began this examination of Trinity Sunday's Gospel lesson was "What is the extent of God's love? How wide is it?" In this story, Jesus demonstrates that God's love is to be extended even to a Gentile – and not only a Gentile, but a commander of the military force that is occupying the Jewish nation against their will. Thus, Jesus has demonstrated what he had earlier commanded – that love is to be extended even to the enemy (6:22-23). God's love is as wide as the earth itself, to all the peoples of the earth, no matter who they are. And Jesus is rewarded in extending God's love to a conqueror who exhibits unconditional faith and trust in Jesus, a faith that Jesus has never seen demonstrated by any theologically informed, orthodox, law-abiding, practicing Jew!

Galatians 1:1-12 is a most unusual, and in some ways inappropriate beginning to the letter Paul wrote to the church in Galatia. In Roman society, there was a stylized way to start a letter (comparable to our heading of the letter with the name and address of the person to whom it is being sent, followed by a "Dear Sir" or "Dear Name"). To depart from that stylized format is most unusual, and would be done in only the most extraordinary situations. And yet that is precisely what Paul does here.

The stylized opening of a letter began with the name of its author, a statement of his credentials for writing this letter, the person or group to whom the letter was written, a greeting and then a prayer of thanksgiving for them (see I Cor. 1:1-9 or Phil. 1:1-11 or any of the other letters of Paul for samples of this correct form).

But that is not what happens in Paul's letter to the church in Galatia. Rather, after opening it with his name, his credentials, the name of the church and a brief greeting, Paul does what is clearly a breach of etiquette. Rather than giving thanks for the Galatian Christians, he admonishes them (1:6-12). It is as if he is so driven to confront them on their misdeed that he can't even go through proper protocol but must immediately call them to accountability. He states "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (1:6). And then his attack begins.

About what is Paul so exercised? He is writing to a group of churches spread across the territory of Galatia, including but not confined to the Roman province of Galatia. Galatia included the entirety of what today are Turkey and the Kurdish area of Iraq, made up primarily of people of Celtic origin. We know of churches in Antioch-in-Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe but also likely Ancyra, Pessinus and Tavium which Paul visited over all three of his missionary journeys (Acts 13:4—14:28; 16:6; 18:23).

The Galatians had responded enthusiastically to the gospel preached by Paul and had created churches to sustain their life together. But we can surmise, from reading between the lines in the book of Galatia (1:7-10), they were apparently visited by Christian Jews after Paul had left them. Those Christian Jews argued that the Galatians had not fully embraced Jesus as Savior and Messiah unless they obeyed the Mosaic Law, symbolized by the males being circumcised. The Galatians had believed what they had just been told, got themselves circumcised and began following the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law. This enraged Paul because, from his perspective, they were unthinkingly betraying the very essence of the gospel in that they were sacrificing its

very essence of Christ's act of mercy that saved them in order to substitute good works as the ground of their salvation. Therefore, Paul wrote the book of Galatians to address this betrayal of faith by the Galatian churches.

Paul's statement to them is quite clear. "If anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received (from me), let that one be accursed!" I did not proclaim to you this gospel of God's grace, Paul continues, because I was interested in gaining your approval or making Christianity easy (vs. 10). Nor am I in rebellion against the leaders of the Christian church (the Jerusalem Council) who gave me this authority to preach. Rather, Paul contends, my authority comes from God alone, and the gospel I preach I received as a direct revelation from God (e.g., Acts 9:3-5; 22:6-10; 26:13-18; I Cor. 15:8) that the Jerusalem Council carefully examined and endorsed as an accurate statement of the gospel! So I come with God's authority, and with theirs (1:11-12).

By presenting this argument at the very beginning of his letter, Paul has set the dimensions of the book of Galatians. This will be a book that thoroughly explores the doctrine of God's irresistible grace that demonstrates that a person is not justified before God by obeying the Law or by doing good deeds but by God's undeserved and freely given love through Jesus Christ. We are already accepted by God. We don't have to make ourselves acceptable. Our problem is not that we are not accepted, but that we cannot accept that we are accepted. Thus, the entire book of Galatians is Paul's call to the Galatians Christians to embrace the God who already loved them so much that he gave his Son to die for their redemption.

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