

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a; Psalm 42 and 43; Luke 8:26-39; Galatians 3:23-29

I Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a is one of the most awe-inspiring and powerful stories in the Old Testament. Elijah the prophet had just won the contest between himself and the 850 priests of Ba'al where Yahweh had answered with fire and proven himself God. Elijah had won a great victory for God as the people declared, 'Yahweh, he is the God!' Inspired by the victory, the people then purged their country of the 850 priests of Ba'al. That, in turn, brought a severe reaction from Queen Jezebel. "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make Elijah's life like the life of one of the dead priests of Ba'al by this time tomorrow", she vowed (19:2). And Elijah decided that it would be most discrete to make himself scarce!

Angry, depressed, frightened and thoroughly confused, Elijah fled into the wilderness. Why had God let him down? Why was he facing such major persecution and defeat after so splendid a victory? How could such a reversal of fortune have happened so quickly?

Wandering aimlessly in the desert, the sun beating down on his head, his throat parched with water, Elijah came to a ravine in which there was a large bush. He threw himself down in the shade of the bush, and looked out over the deathly stillness of the wilderness. And he reflected on all that had happened to him over the past few days – the great victory he had won, the cheering people, the defeated monarchs – and then this totally irrational, inexplicable reversal of public opinion. And now he, the prophet who had won such a great victory for Yahweh, was fleeing for this life in the desert.

Elijah, in total desperation, cried out to God, "It is enough! O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors" (19:4). But God wouldn't accept such despair. Rather, God acted!

First, God told Elijah, "Return to your origins". The text tells us that, after his angry cry, "I have had enough", Elijah sat under the shade bush dejected and resigned. There he fell asleep, but was suddenly awakened by the touch of another person. There before him stood a messenger from Yahweh. "Get up and eat", he commanded offering Elijah bread and water. "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you" (vs. 7). What journey, the prophet wanted to know? And the messenger turned and pointed in the direction of Horeb – Mt. Sinai.

Mount Sinai – the most holy spot in all of Israel's history. Mt. Sinai – where God had met with Israel and had covenanted with them to be their god if they would be his people. Mt. Sinai – where the Israelite life-style of justice, equitable sharing of wealth and relationship with God was given through the Ten Commandments. God was commanding Elijah to go to Mt. Sinai, to return to the origins of Israel's faith and, consequently, his own faith.

Returning to our Christian origins is essential both for remembering who we are and building our sense of purpose and hope. Returning to our origins reminds us of the great heritage of which we are a part, stretching over 3,000 years and uniting entire nations of the world in the worship of Yahweh and, for us who are Christians, embracing that God in the man Christ Jesus. It reminds us, as well, of our own personal origins in the faith, how God has worked and moved in our own lives, drawing us to God's self. When we look at that history, no matter how dark the

present might be, we cannot help but pray, “Lord, you have been faithful in the past. You will be faithful in my future. I can trust you in this present dark moment!”

Second, God told Elijah, “Meet with me.” When Elijah arrived at Mt. Sinai, God said to him, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by” (vs. 11). Elijah did as he was told, and the text then states, “There was a great wind, 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” (vss. 11b-12).

This is a significant statement. In every theophany (appearance of God) that appeared in the Old Testament before this account, God was always accompanied by fire, wind, thunder, lightning or earthquake (e.g., Judg. 5:4-5; Pss. 18:7-15; 68:7-8; Hab. 3:15). But in this passage, God comes as “a sound of sheer silence” (the Hebrew actually says, “the sound of a soft whisper”), in the most gentle and eerie stillness.

And Elijah found Yahweh there. Elijah found Yahweh, not as the God of power, the God of violence, the God of mighty works – but as a God of intimacy, of quietness, a God who personally cared for his much-maligned prophet. Elijah learned first hand, in meeting God as a still, small voice what another prophet would later share with the whole world – that “in returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength” (Isa. 30:15, KJV).

If there is anything that I have learned in my personal spiritual journey, it is that God comes to us in “the sound of silence”. We cannot hear God’s call to us or receive God’s comforting touch when we are caught up in the rush and pressure of life. God has become real to me only to the degree that I am willing to leave the schedules and appointments and demands and deadlines, and make room for God. God comes to us only as we take time to be still and to enter into that space of quiet within us all.

Third, God told Elijah, “Return to the battle – and I will give you one to share in that battle.” In the final part of this Old Testament lesson (19:13-18), Yahweh told Elijah to return to Israel. He informed the prophet that the struggle ahead of him would be even more intense than that which lay behind him. God gave Elijah specific instructions as to what he was to do. But then God did one thing more. He told Elijah to find a young man named Elisha, the son of Shaphat (v. 16). For Elisha would become Elijah’s companion, mentored by Elijah and working alongside the older prophet until Elijah’s homecoming. Then Elisha would continue to carry out the reforming work Elijah had begun in Israel.

If we are faithful to God’s call to us, then it is inevitable that we will be increasingly contending against the “principalities and powers” of the world that serve greed, lust for power and exclusivity that result in the people’s exploitation, oppression and domination. But we will not go into that struggle alone. We have each other. We have the community of faith. And it is in the receiving of each other’s support, each other’s caring for one another, and each other’s prayers that we are sustained and encouraged to do that work to which God has called each one of us. In the midst of the coming intense battle, God has given us to be Elisha’s to each other!

Return to your origins. Meet with God there. Return to the battle – and I will give you one to join with you in the battle. These are the ways God equips God’s people to be God’s means to bring God’s transformation to the world!

Psalms 42 and 43 deal with the grief and pain felt by Israel in their captivity, thus making them a fitting companion to the story of Elijah’s exile in the wilderness. The two psalms (which are one psalm in the Catholic Bible) were written during the Babylonian Exile, and present a poignant story indeed.

“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?”” (42:1-3).

The imagery is particularly vivid – of a timid and vulnerable deer desperately seeking for water. Thus, our souls are likened to that deer, desperately seeking God.

The key to this passage, however, is found in the question the psalmist asks in 42:2b: “**When** shall I come and behold the face of God?” The issue is not **where** the writer will find God, or **whether** he will. The issue is **when** he will meet God. The assumption is that the psalmist knows quite well where God is – God is in the Temple in Jerusalem, and only in the Temple in Jerusalem (42:4). But the author is in exile in Babylon 1,000 miles from Jerusalem. Therefore, since he is in Babylon and since God is only found in the Temple in Jerusalem, for him to be in political exile among his Babylonian captors is for him to be as much in exile from God as from his countrymen. So the only issue to him is when he will be liberated from Babylonian capture to return to Jerusalem where he can once again meet God and worship him in the Temple. That God could go with the psalmist into exile was beyond the capacity of the psalmist to even begin to imagine! **That** is why he is longing for and thirsting for God – even “as a deer longs for flowing streams”.

“These things I remember, as I pour out my soul; how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God” (vss. 4-5).

Here is the passage that confirms the interpretation appearing above. The author here remembers the processions he led into the Temple (was this psalmist the high priest or a prince of Israel?). For him, such processions had not simply been ritual and liturgy. These were times of authentic celebration and even jubilation. “With glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving”, he had participated joyfully and enthusiastically in these celebrations.

But now, his soul is “cast down” and “disquieted within (him),” for not only is he deprived of the joy of participation in such gala Temple worship; he is bereft of God Himself!

“I say to God, my rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?” As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, “Where is your God?”” (42:9-10)?

Here is the saddest note of all. This psalmist feels forgotten by God, abandoned by God at the Psalmist’s time of greatest vulnerability when he is being taunted by his oppressors in Babylon with the cry, “Where is your God?”

What most strikes one in this passage is the inability of this psalmist and his contemporaries in Babylonian exile to think “outside the box”, to envision God in any other way than their orthodoxy allows. To them, Yahweh is a territorial God, supreme in Israel but absent elsewhere. Yet the Israelites’ entire religious origins in their liberation as a nation from Egyptian slavery tell them otherwise. It is as if that story of liberation has lost all capacity to influence their thinking, for if they had honestly looked at that story, they would have seen that Yahweh had defeated Amon-Re on the latter god’s own turf – Egypt! That would have demonstrated to this psalmist that Yahweh was a universal and not a territorial God, and that he was supreme over all gods. This Psalmist cannot envision God as anything other than a territorial deity, and therefore can never perceive that God has gone with him and the other Israelites into Babylonian captivity and is consequently with them there in that terrible situation. The psalmist and his contemporaries never needed to long for God’s presence among them “as a deer longs for flowing streams” – for God was right there, in the midst of their suffering! And they could not see that truth!

Psalm 43 is a continuation of Psalm 42. Verses 1 and 2 simply reiterate the insights of Psalm 42, and then create a transition to verses 3 and 4. These verses present new material.

“O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God”.

The Psalmist asks for God to send out rays of his “light and truth” from Jerusalem, so that it may cross over the miles to Babylon and capture and bring back to the Temple mount the exiled Jews. If God does that, then, the Psalmist suggests, the returned exile will be grateful to God and will praise him for their rescue.

Again, the Psalmist cannot conceive of God accompanying the Jewish exiles to Babylon and there making his home among them. The most God can do is “send out (his) light and truth” – a temporary invasion of Babylonian space in order to bring the Israelites back home to Himself.

After making this assertion, the Psalmist closes with the chorus in 43:5, which was also repeated in 42:5 and 42:11:

“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.”

Luke 8:26-39 is the story of Jesus' healing of the Gerasene demoniac. It is important to note that the Gerasene territory was not in Israel but in Gentile territory; so this is Jesus' first foray into Gentile land in the Gospel of Luke, and demonstrates that his words and acts have as much power there as in Galilee or Judea.

There are three elements in this story that are particularly striking.

First is the condition of the demoniac. The text tells us that the man "had demons", "wore no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs" (vs. 27). Further, it tells us that "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" (vs. 29b). But Jesus heals him (vv. 34-35). And it is noteworthy that Luke uses the same parallel construction in exploring his healing. The demonized man is saved, the naked man clothed, the out of control man in his right mind and submissive to Jesus, the man living among the dead now commissioned to proclaim the gospel to the living. The demoniac changes from a condition of complete derangement to that of wholeness.

But before his healing by Jesus, the demoniac was more than deranged. He was also greatly oppressed and marginalized by the people of Gerasa because he intimidated and frightened them, opening them to the potentials of madness that resided also in them. So the demoniac follows the pattern of powerless people in Luke – ostracized, marginalized and oppressed by the people and yet very intimidating.

Second, the story tells us that Jesus healed the man by exorcising his demons and transferring them to a herd of swine. The pigs then rush down the hillside into the lake, and drown. The swineherds run to the city to report what has happened. The people rush out and "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" (vs. 35)! So "the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear" (vs. 37b).

This is a most intriguing sequence of events. The man whom the people feared and had marginalized had been made well, both restored to personal wholeness and to their society. They ought to have rejoiced in that healing, and taken advantage of Jesus' presence to get their own sick healed, as well. But, instead, they were so intimidated that they quickly got rid of Jesus. Why this seemingly inappropriate response?

I can explain the response only by combining several realities in one major act of rejection. First, the healing of the man turned the tables, completely upsetting the established order of all that brought purpose and order to the life of the Gerasenes; it might not be ideal to have a wild, demonized man in their midst, but they had learned to cope with him and to control him. They had ordered their world, no matter how unhappy that world might be. There was no longer an excuse for having a marginalized element in their society, for the man had been restored to wholeness. And this was something with which they could not cope, for from their perspective you can't have a society unless you have those who are going to be "up", and those who are going to be "down".

Further, the healing resulted in the destruction of their herd of pigs. This was their economic livelihood. The city's wealth was based upon their care for a resource (pork), both for all that Gentile territory and for the Roman army lodged there; without the presence of the occupying army and the Gentiles, there would be scant demand for pork (since the territory was dominated by the Jewish culture that doesn't eat pork). Jesus' actions, while serving the demoniac, destroyed the economic base upon which that city's wealth was built. So Jesus was "messing" with the economic order.

Finally, I would think they would be afraid of any individual who would have the power to enable a deranged man to be made well, could upset the established "pecking order" of their society and could overturn the entire economic system – all in one action! This man was a threat to their well-being! This man would disrupt everything – turn all of life upside down (both its systems and its interpersonal relationships). The people's choice would be either to receive him and his benefits – and change their society accordingly. Or it would be to ask him to leave. And because they couldn't countenance the former, they chose the latter – to their profound hurt!

The third element of this story is its closing. "Jesus sent (the man) 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" (vss. 38b-39).

The people of Gerasa couldn't get rid of Jesus so easily. Jesus returned the man to his home in that town – but this time with a difference, for he returns healed and proclaiming how Jesus had liberated him in every way from the shackles of his society. The man remains in that town as a vocal reminder of what God had done in "proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (4:18b-19). Tables overturned can never be up righted and the situation returned to its former, controlling state. For the very presence and voice of the healed and liberated oppressed one is a constant reminder "throughout the city (of) how much Jesus had done for him!"

Galatians 3:23-29 is both a troubling and an inspiring passage. It is troubling in what it seems to say about the Mosaic Law. It is inspiring in what it says about our commonality in Christ.

First, it is troubling in what it seems to say about the Mosaic Law. Paul writes, "Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith" (3:23-24). As it is translated into English, this passage seems to describe the Law as being solely that of pointing out to us how wicked we are and whipping us into shape. But that is clearly not how Paul wishes to describe the Law here, given the words he used.

The key word for unlocking this passage is the word translated "disciplinarian" (Greek: *paidagogos*). This word is the word from which we derive the English word, "pedagogy" which is simply the art or science of teaching. A *paidagogos* ("pedagogue") was a household slave or servant who was responsible for the raising of the son in a wealthy Roman or Greek family. He was that son's tutor, teaching him what he would otherwise learn in a classroom. He was the guardian of the child, being sure he didn't get into trouble but if he did to discipline him and to

correct behavior. In other words, the *paidagogos* was responsible for the moral, academic and personal formation of that child. Thus, Aristotle, the great philosopher, was the *paidagogos* of the boy who would someday become Alexander the Great.

So, Paul is saying, the Mosaic Law is our *paidagogos*. It is responsible for teaching us how God intends both us as individuals and the world to live. And it is responsible for being our guardian and keeping us out of trouble or out of harms way through our knowing and obeying the right. The Law is responsible for our formation as human beings and as the people of Yahweh. Thus, the Law “guarded” us and “imprisoned” us (or “set our limits”).

So what Paul is saying about the Law here is not pejorative. It is simply limiting. He is arguing, “The Law was not designed to save you; it was designed to teach and warn you. So don’t ask of the Law to do what it was not designed to do. All it can do is to keep you on the “straight and narrow” (if you are willing). It can’t make you right with God, free you from your sin, or redeem you, nor can it transform the world into God’s ideal. That is why the Law played only a temporary role, awaiting the coming of God’s real solution – Jesus Christ.”

Second, this scripture is inspiring in what it says about our commonality in Christ. Paul points out, “But now that (Christ) has come, we are no longer subject to a *paidagogos*, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (vss. 25-27). Why settle for the substitute, Paul argues, when you can have the real thing? Through his death, Jesus – the true Son of God – has made it possible for all of us to become “sons and daughters of God” through adoption. That is, by receiving for our own lives what God has already done for us through the redemptive death of his authentic son, we become children of God. We are no longer “students” sitting under the requirements of the *paidagogos*, but we are now children of God. And the sign that we have been adopted into the household of God is our binding adoption papers – our baptism!

As those who, across the Roman Empire (read, “the whole world”) are God’s adopted children, then who are we as family? “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (vss. 28-29). It is irrelevant what our ethnic origin is, what our background might be, what our economic position might be, what our gender might be. For Christians, all the former indicators by which humanity divided itself one from the other are gone. No matter whom we are, where we are from or what has gone into making us who we are, we are family – we are one people in Christ. (Or, Paul suggests, to put it another way, we are all authentic Jews, obedient to the Law, for all the requirements have been filled!)

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