

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
10th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 6, 2010

Strange Prophet, Stranger God

1 Kings 17:1-24; Luke 7:11-17

Before we turn to the story of Elijah,
I want to say just a few words about my own recent story,
and let you know how the Hoyt family is faring...
I am settled into my little apartment at Presidential Arms,
and the kids have spent the weekend with me.
During this period that Mary Ellen and I are separated,
Langley and James will be coming with me to church.
I have to say that they are being good sports about all this
while their Mom and Dad sort through
whatever it is Mom's and Dad's have to sort through.
James is still playing baseball and mini-hockey and reading
and Langley is still going to birthday parties, drawing, and reading.
Not to make light of a very difficult time,
but there are moments of relief and some normalcy.

My parents visited last week from Atlanta and helped me move.
Mary Ellen's parents visited this weekend from Virginia and are very supportive of us all.
And so many of you in the congregation have expressed your love and prayers
that we do feel enfolded by the arms of our church family
during the pain and uncertainty of these days.
It is good not to suffer in isolation.

Over the next several months,
I will be taking special care not to turn the pulpit into a therapy chair,
but I thought it might help this morning for me to share
how we have explained to the kids about this time
in our family's life.
It's like a man who breaks his leg, and he's pretty sure it's broken.
But this man needs his leg to get around, to do his work, to take care of his family,
so he doesn't go see the doctor and have the leg properly set.
As a result, the leg grows back together improperly,
so that it is weak, and prone to break again,
and causes the man chronic pain.
So after breaking the leg several more times,
the man finally cannot go on and must go see the doctor.
Now the leg needs surgery to set it properly so it can grow back together
and be strong again.
And the doctor will tell the man

he will have to keep the pressure off the leg while it heals;
until this healing takes place, the leg will not bear the full weight of his body.
And the man will have to do strenuous physical therapy
to help the leg grow strong again.

That is what sometimes happens in marriages,
and what is happening in ours.

While Mary Ellen and I are trying to set things right - which is a painful process -
our marriage cannot bear the full weight of our living together.

But we are staying in marital therapy, every week,
doing those things that we hope will help us regain our strength.
In time, it is our prayer that our marriage will stand strong and healthy again.

So let me say thank you for your prayers
that time will bring healing and peace for our family.
It is a strange time for us all as we walk this unfamiliar leg of our journey.

The Bible is full of stories about God's strange ways.
I don't mean any insult to the Holy One of Heaven,
but isn't it true that God's ways are so often strange to us;
that is, unrecognizable as being from God.

Strange in the sense that
we sometimes have a hard time understanding *just how* God is at work,
and *what* God is up to,
if God is in fact the good, loving, righteous God that we believe him to be.

On the other hand, there is very little strange about these stories,
in that they are about human life facing the challenge of living;
they are about love and hope and fear and heartbreak and joy.

Most of the characters we can relate to without much of a stretch.
Even some of the stranger ones, like Elijah the Tishbite.

One day Elijah of Tishbe in Gilead speaks to bad King Ahab of Israel.
Ahab was a bad king because he had been worshiping the Baals of Canaan,
thinking they would give him life and prosperity,
rather than relying only on the Lord God as the source of his life.

Elijah says to bad King Ahab,
You are about to suffer a drought and a famine
and there will be no rain until I say the word.
Then Elijah ran away and hid by a wadi, or a brook,
and survived by drinking from the brook

and eating the food that the ravens brought to him to eat.

Now because we already know Elijah was a great prophet
this may not seem so strange to us.

But neither Ahab nor anyone else in Israel,
knew anything about Elijah when he shows up from Tishbe in Gilead
and begins to pronounce judgment on Israel's king.
He must appear to them as a rather strange character,
and easily dismissable
That is, until the rain stops falling.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that
drought is an ancient form of energy crisis.
The energy crisis in Ahab's day means that the government has failed.
The king, in all his power and glory, could not cause rain.
The world economy, as they knew it, had failed.
Without rain, the whole world would fall into economic depression -
and many people would suffer and die.

Into this situation of despair comes Elijah:
he is uncredentialed, uncontaminated by the idolatrous King,
and unimpressed by government plans for rain.
He is also untested, because nobody knows what he can do.¹
And of course, nobody listens to a nobody
and we can almost hear Ahab sneer at Elijah's warning.

The next character to appear is also unimpressive in the eyes of the ancient world:
a nameless woman.
Not only does this woman lack a name in the narrative,
she lacks a husband because he has died.
A nameless widow is the most marginalized of characters in an Old Testament story.
Without a husband she has not means of livelihood.
She is poor, and her son with her is poor.
Her son, in fact, is her only hope for life.
If he could grow and thrive, he might work and help them stay alive.

When the wadi dries up, God sends Elijah the strange prophet
to go find this nameless widow in Zarephath.
So the nobody prophet of Tishbe and the nameless widow of Zarephath
are somehow under the watchful eye and provident hand of God,
for God promises through Elijah that this woman and her son
will have a plentiful supply of food until the drought comes to an end.

In this strange story, God does nothing to help the King.
He does not work through the royal channels, with any party endorsement,

or from the wealth of economic lobbyists and power-brokers.
God sends a drought to teach a lesson to those who have put their trust in other gods,
or in their own plans apart from God,
and God provides life for those who continue to trust in him.

Then, just when it seems God has helped these faithful few through their crisis,
the nameless widow's nameless son falls ill and dies.

Her heart is broken and her future is doomed.

She attributes this as a sign of judgment on her -

God's judgment through the prophet:

O man of God?

*You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance,
and to cause the death of my son!"*

But once again this nobody prophet works a strange miracle

and praying to God, and trusting in God,

he brings the widow's son back to life.

Sometimes I wonder about the economy, or the efficiency
of the divine power and purpose:

Wouldn't it have been just as easy to leave the son alone in the first place,
just let him live?

But somehow this death and resurrection,

this period of human struggle and anxiety,

yielding to wonderment and joy,

served God's purposes.

In this strange turn of events, inexplicable at times, excruciating in its depths,

God worked to fulfill the promise of life.

Wouldn't you agree that at times God's ways are strange?

The means by which God achieves the divine purpose is baffling?

As the readers of this story,

we see from a broader vantage point

that God's purposes are being worked out.

But consider things from the limited view of the widow, or her son.

What could possibly be served, in their minds, by the absence of water,

or the contraction of a deadly illness.

It is just the way things are in the ups and downs of human life,

and life seems to them nothing more than a vale of tears.

In our own lives we do not often get to see things from a reader's perspective,

but from within the unfolding story,

and with limited knowledge of what God is doing.

The widow chooses to trust Elijah, and therefore trust God,
by taking time to draw water for him,
and to trust him again,
by making for him a cake of what little meal she had left in her jar,
and finally to trust him again
by giving him the body of her dead son.
And that is what we are called to do in the stranger moments of life
when life seems to *us* nothing but a vale of tears.

Today, our experience at this table is just such an exercises of trust.
It is an entering into the human suffering of Jesus,
into the inexplicable injustice of his crucifixion
the seemingly senseless early extinction of his blessed life and ministry.
We enter into this story in all the ways it resonates with our own
inexplicable and seemingly senseless
hardships and sorrows.

We come to this table as a exercise of trust
that God's redeeming hand is at work to create what we could never create
or even imagine on our own -
a life and a world not of our own making
but of God's wondrous, mysterious design.

God is God and we are not.
God is life and love, and we will be blessed when we learn to trust him,
one moment at at time, in the unfolding of our earthly lives.

ⁱ Loosely quoted from Walter Brueggemann, *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power, and Weakness*, ed. Charles L. Campbell (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 42.