

“Let It Be Known”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson – 1 Kings 18:20-21, 30-39 New Testament Lesson – Romans 12:9-18

“Most Americans are thoughtful, caring, and generous. We try to do our best by family and friends. We'll even stop to help a fellow driver stranded by a roadside breakdown, or give spare change to a stranger.

But increasingly, a wall separates each of us from the world outside, and from others who have taken refuge in their own private sanctuaries. How can we renew the public participation that's the very soul of democratic citizenship? ...

Certainly we need to decide for ourselves whether particular causes are wise or foolish. But we also need to believe that our individual involvement is worthwhile, that what we might do in the public sphere will not be in vain. The challenge is as much psychological as political. As the Ethiopian proverb says, “He who conceals his disease cannot be cured.”

We need to understand our cultural diseases – callousness, short-sightedness, denial – and learn what it will take to heal our society and our souls. How did so many of us become convinced that we can do nothing to affect the future our children and grandchildren will inherit? And how have others managed to work powerfully for change?”¹

That just about sums it up, doesn't it? Our society today – whether you're looking at politics, religion, the family, our school systems, or whatever – society seems to be in distress, gripped by some “cultural disease,” as it was just said. What I just read for you was written by Paul Rogat Loeb in his article “Soul of a Citizen: Living With Conviction In a Cynical Time.”

And as much as it seems to sum society today, Loeb's description was written in 1999, nearly 15 years ago. So even more shocking than his difficult diagnosis is the fact the condition seems to be chronic, it's been going on for well over a decade. What are we to do?

Or as Loeb asks, “How did so many of us become convinced that we can do nothing to affect the future ...? And how have others managed to work powerfully for change” – whether in politics, religion, their own families, our school systems, or wherever?

In today's Old Testament Lesson, Elijah is also faced with a seemingly hopeless situation in the religious and political life of the people.

¹ Paul Rogat Loeb, “Soul of a Citizen: Living with conviction in a cynical time,” Utne Reader, July-August 1999, 46.

And like us, Elijah is ready to throw his hands up in despair, crying out, “How long will you go limping” along. Then Elijah does something we find very difficult to do – he steps out in faith and acts on his conviction. Elijah acts as if God is large and in charge, and as if God will act on our behalf – when called upon, and honored, and followed.

Our struggle is having faith enough to act, even in the midst of seemingly hopeless circumstances, circumstances we are certain are out of our hands, too big to overcome, too powerful and entrenched for us to affect.

And yet, had Elijah settled for that assessment and thrown his hands in defeat, you and I wouldn’t be sitting here right now. The faith practices and beliefs that bring us together today have been nurtured, developed and grown, and sustained for eons. Within that context, and given the example of Elijah and the people of Israel, perhaps society’s situation today is not that hopeless after all.

So, let’s look at what Elijah did when he was faced with a people who thoughtlessly followed the false gods of Ba’al, which we talked about last week. Last week we identified today’s false gods as anything that we thoughtlessly allow to consume our time and energy, damage our bodies, break down our families, and otherwise distract us from God’s word and God’s work.

When Elijah saw his people going in the wrong direction spiritually and culturally, he staged what I would call an intervention – you know, a heart-to-heart encounter that tells it like it is and, in the end, gives hope to the hopeless, inspires action among the inactive, and paves a path forward for us through the wilderness of lost causes.

Here’s what Elijah’s intervention looked like. According to 1 Kings: Elijah says to all the people, “Come closer to me.” Then he repairs the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down, taking 12 stones – to represent the 12 tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the LORD said, ‘Israel shall be your name; and with those stones, he builds an altar in the name of the LORD.

So the first thing Elijah does is honor the past in a way that celebrates how much God has already accomplished, how much God has already set in motion, when God first said to the people, to our spiritual ancestors, “Israel shall be your name.”

In other words, by setting up the 12 stones to symbolize the 12 tribes of Israel, Elijah is honoring and celebrating the fact that God has chosen us as God’s people, God’s workforce in building up the Kingdom of God.

Think of the Kingdom of God as a place where people don’t thoughtlessly and aimlessly waste their time and energy but rather work on God’s behalf, a place where people don’t do things that damage their bodies but rather respect their bodies and honor their souls, a place where families are built up not torn down, a place where we don’t let anything distract us from God’s word and God’s work.

The type of nation or people or communities that Elijah awakened more than 2,600 years ago in the pages of 1 Kings is the type of nation or people or community that God seeks to rekindle within us today.

God's strongest desire for us is to become a people who, when things seem hopeless, unachievable, and too far off to even image, they step out in faith anyway, and act, on God's behalf. God calls us to be a people who move forward in the certainty that God is out in front of us, leading the way forward.

People with that certainty of faith are not only empowered to act, they're inspired to lead, lead in such a way that those around them begin to follow, they begin to crave and develop an equally strong faith, a sense of certainty that against all odds God can achieve wondrous things, a faith strong enough for them to step out into the unknown as well, and to act with equal boldness on behalf of God.

Jesuit priest Thomas J. Reese, in his book titled "Inside the Vatican," gives five rules for surviving and thriving in religious and political bureaucracies: Don't think. If you think – don't speak. If you think and if you speak – don't write. If you think, and if you speak, and if you write – don't sign your name. If you think, and if you speak, and if you write, and if you sign your name – don't be surprised.²

Now, we hear that and think, yeah, don't be surprised by the trouble that comes your way. But that's us falling into a trap that's been created by all the false gods in our lives, the false gods that leave us feeling like it's not worth trying – the trap of skepticism and defeatism and faithlessness that has us afraid or reluctant to act, regardless of what God would have us do, what God has waiting for us out in our future.

When Elijah repaired the altar of the Lord that had been torn down, there's nothing in the Bible that says he wasn't afraid to act. But he acted anyway, on behalf of God. And he acted on faith – boy did he act on faith.

1 Kings tells us not only did Elijah repair the altar so that God might prove his power by answering with fire, but Elijah also made a trench around the altar and then had the people pour four jars of water over his sacrificial bull and over the wood. Three times he had them do this, "so that the water ran all round the altar, and filled the trench.

This is how Elijah sets up his part of the divine challenge that we heard about last week. Last week, we heard how the prophets of the false god Ba'al had likewise prepared a sacrificial bull and laid it on the wood. They followed Elijah's instructions to put no fire to it. And then, with the two altars prepared, each side was to call on the name of their god – either Ba'al or the God of Israel – "and the god who answers by fire, is indeed God."

² Thomas J. Reese, *Inside the Vatican* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 164.

You can picture it, can't you? The Ba'al prophets standing around their bone-dry altar calling out to Ba'al, begging him to spark fire for them – and nothing happens. And then there's Elijah, standing next to his dripping-wet altar, crying out:

“O LORD, 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 LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.’

Then (while the Ba'al prophets watch their altar just sitting there collecting dust) the fire of the LORD (falls upon the altar Elijah raised up), and (it) consumes the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licks up the water that was in the trench.

When all the people saw (this),” “they fell on their faces and said, ‘The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.’” What would it take for us to fall on our faces and say, “The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God?” And not just us, but all people! That's the vision of the Kingdom of God that is cast by all that we read in scripture.

Through the prophets, through the parables of Jesus, in the Psalms, we are shown again and again a world in which all people order their lives and their actions and their thoughts around their faith in God. It's not what we have now in this world of ours, but it is what God intends, what God promises us.

And even if we can't imagine how it might be accomplished, we are nonetheless called to step out in faith and action, called to move God's vision forward. Elijah had only his faith on which to act when he rebuilt that altar, doused it with water, and called upon God to do the rest. And look what God did – more than anyone could imagine, consuming the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even lapping up the water! Amazing stuff!

But no more amazing than what God is prepared to do in response to our faithful actions, as individuals and as a community of faith. We can be assured that when we step out in faith and act on God's behalf, amazing things will happen. And it doesn't matter how improbable it is, it doesn't matter what type of a wet blanket we are up against, with God on our side we are poised to see some amazing stuff, some amazing signs of God's power and God's faithfulness.

Elijah lived into the challenge that he was up against – a nation of people following false gods, a nation of people tearing down the altar of the Lord, tearing down all that is good and beneficial in life. Elijah stepped out in faith to act on behalf of God, in spite of the odds that were against him.

And because he returned to the basics of his faith, as a servant of God sent out into the world, because Elijah held fast to his faith and stepped out in action, God was pleased to perform a miracle for all the world to see.

It's a miracle available to us today, even across the eons of time: the miracle of God's people restored to faithful living. It's a miracle that is out ahead of us in our future, a miracle just waiting for us to step out in faith.

Next week we'll follow Elijah just a little bit further before returning to our New Testament lessons the week after that. If the message today is step out in faith and let it be known, next week we'll look at what exactly we might find, as we boldly step out into the future based on our faith; faith in what God has in store.

But for now, spend some time this week thinking about or journaling about or just making a list of what you as an individual – or what this church as a people of faith – could be doing to share the faith and to expand the Kingdom of God. Jot down a few ideas this week. And bring them with you next Sunday.

If all our fears and reservations were set aside, if all our set ways of being slipped away and we were freed to act boldly with abandon on behalf of God, what might that look like? Would it sound anything like the prophet Elijah when he said, "O LORD, ... let it be known this day that you are God ..., that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding."

If those were the words God was asking you to declare before all the people, what actions might you take to have them heard? What exchanges and encounters might we have – as families, as individuals, as a people of faith – that would show the world that God truly is leading us forward, toward a new reality, toward a new Kingdom, and toward a new way of being? What words might you be freed up to share with others, what actions might we be inspired to take?

PASTORAL PRAYER

We confess, O God, that it is far more comfortable to sit in the pew and profess to follow you, than to walk with you into places we would rather not go.

Yet our faith is such that we are called to go forth with others into foreign lands: lands of grief ... and pain ... and illness.

Grant us the strength, we pray, to be your agents of healing in our ministry to others.

And our faith is such that we are called to go forth for others as we respond to those whose needs are beyond our comprehension.

We pray for those who know not where their next meal is coming from; for those whose pillow is stone; for those who live their lives in quiet desperation because to speak the truth would mean death.

And we know that some who are here are too weary for words and for action. Grant them, we pray, the certainty of your presence and enable them to relax in the arms of your love.

Kindle the spark of our faith that we might be set afire with enthusiasm for the adventure to which you have called us.

Let us not forget the name of your son is Emmanuel ... God with us, Our Lord and Savior, who is with all of us, and who has left us words to pray to inspire and to govern our actions, the words of the Lord's Prayer, these words we pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.