

Pentecost 4C Proper 7 Sermon 062010  
1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a; Psalm 42 and 43  
Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

In the name of one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

I love the story of Elijah on Mount Horeb. It is one of my favorite in the Elijah series of Old Testament stories. What precedes this morning's reading is also an interesting story in which Elijah challenges some supposed prophets of the god Baal to a duel of prophetic powers. You see, King Ahab and his non-Jewish queen, Jezebel, had been openly worshiping Baal, the pagan god. Elijah (through God) got wind of this and spoke out against the queen and her group of prophets. He challenged two hundred and fifty of the prophets to prove that they were as powerful as God. They could not. After Elijah won the contest, he took them down into a gully and killed them all. Naturally enough, when Jezebel found out about the wholesale slaughter of her prophets, she put out a contract on Elijah. As this morning's reading starts, we find him in hiding – waiting to hear what God wants him to do.

On God's orders Elijah ended up on Mount Horeb – which is another name for Mt. Sinai (where Moses met with God during the time in the wilderness). Elijah was certain that he was going to meet God face-to-face on the mountain top. But when the great wind blew strong enough to break the mountain, God was not in the wind. Then came an earthquake followed by a great fire. But neither was God in either of those events.

Instead, God was in the still, small voice that could only be heard in silence. There are many lessons to be learned from this reading, but one stuck out to me this week.

I was in conversations with a young woman who had just received a frightening medical diagnosis. She is happily married, has a wonderful job and a beautiful baby. Her life would seem to many people to be absolutely idyllic. And now, this.

When I spoke with this young woman, she was understandably distraught. And I was in somewhat of a quandary. She told me several times that she did not understand why God would do this to her at this point in her life – when she had so much life left to live and so many things to live for. I listened with great empathy and sympathy. But my deepest desire was to be able to teach her the same lesson that Elijah learned on Mount Horeb.

All too often, bad things happen to good people. As so many have learned in the recent economic downturn, people can unexpectedly lose jobs. Along with such losses goes the sense of economic well being and identity that always attach to our employment. Thousands of good people in this country have lost their homes to foreclosure over the last couple of years. I cannot imagine how terrible it would feel to lose the home that you had worked hard for and in which you had taken great pride of ownership. The loss of a loved one, or of a marriage, can leave us with a true sense that we are somehow “losers,” a term with which no one wants to be saddled. The people of the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts have now begun yet another season of loss, with the continuing flow

of oil that fouls everything in its path and destroys land, animal and livelihoods indiscriminately. And then, as with the young woman of whom I spoke – and several people in our own congregation – illness can unexpectedly strike (with prognoses that sound quite scary and do not seem to contain much hope) and these illnesses can leave us shaken to our very core.

The Psalmist this morning speaks of how such losses affect human beings of faith.

Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? \*  
and why are you so disquieted within me?  
I will say to the God of my strength,  
"Why have you forgotten me? \*  
and why do I go so heavily while the enemy oppresses me?"

Loss can leave us questioning God in very fundamental ways. Why me? Why now? Why this? Such questions can lead us away from God. Or they can lead us to quote the Psalmist again: "My soul is athirst for God, athirst for the living God; when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?"

When I spoke with the young woman, I wanted very much to tell her that just as God was not in the great wind on Mt. Horeb, neither was God in her illness. And just as God was not in the earthquake or the fire, neither was God in the tragedy that had struck her life. But I couldn't tell her that. I couldn't sit and begin a lesson in theology with her. This was not the time. It was not the time because right now – just like the Gerasene demoniac we heard about in the Gospel this morning – she is possessed. She may not be possessed by literal demons (devils in red suits with pitchforks, or horribly vile slime-

spitting images from movies like *The Exorcist*), demons that could jump into hogs and end up in the sea, but she is possessed: by fear, despair and uncertainty. Over time I – or another priest – can hopefully help to be her guide through the terror and the unknown. But for now, we can only begin the process by a ministry of presence – being there and listening as she works through these things on her own.

If we search of God's power in the still small voice that Elijah heard on Mt. Horeb, we can be open enough to God's presence that we can perhaps find the healing offered by Jesus to those who were possessed. Jesus' absolute power over the forces of evil is our hope in times of desperation and loss. Jesus' victory over death and promise of return is our promise that we will never be left alone, no matter how bad things may seem.

No one can explain why bad things happen to good people; but they do. But something of which I am certain is this: the God that loves us enough to suffer the loss of His only Son so that we could benefit from that horrible death; that God could never be so petty or vindictive as to bring calamity upon us – no matter what His reason might be. We live in a broken world and bad things just happen. But the Jesus who defeated demons and storms, the one who fed multitudes with scraps, that Jesus is always present with us – in the still small voice – and that same Jesus brings us comfort, healing and wholeness if we will only be open to His presence. Let us be open to His presence. Amen.