

“Return and Go Declare!”

The Gospel Lesson for today is read from Luke 8:26-39

Hear the words from the disciple, Luke:

Read Luke 8:26-39

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

Most holy and eternal God, you dwell in the heights of heaven, yet you walk among those who refuse to see you. Hold out your hand to those who rebel against you, and free us from the chains that bind us, that we may be healed by Christ and proclaim his saving deeds to all the world. Amen.

Intro:

Good listeners are risk takers. Yet if we were asked to compare listening to speaking we would all agree getting up in front of a crowd and talking is a whole lot riskier, and a whole lot scarier.

We prioritize the speakers over the listeners because speaking is believed to be riskier. The prophet Elijah was a great risk-taking communicator, speaking God’s truth to power – which is what a prophet does. Early prophets were “seers,” or “visionaries,” who received their messages from God through visions or dreams and gave signs, warnings, and predictions. Later prophets, saw God interacting with history. The prophets clearly believe that God enters decisively into human history. The prophet sees, hears, and understands what God is doing or is going to do and, often at great personal peril, announces that reality to the people.

The prophets were opposed to two things – paganism and injustice. Paganism meant not putting God first in their lives. It meant flirting with the gods of other tribes and nations, forgetting their unique covenant community, as a nation chosen to be God’s people. But because

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King Ahab married a foreign princess, Jezebel, and began to practice pagan worship to Baal. Israel began to lose their faith in God.

In the previous chapter came the great contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, Elijah had declared the God of Israel’s superiority over the prophets of Baal, which resulted in the killing of these prophets. This sets us up for today’s scene, where Jezebel promises to exact revenge upon Elijah. Elijah runs for his life, flees the scene, finds a broom tree to sleep under, where he then pleads for God to take his life. Elijah is overcome with fear, overwhelmed, and is at his wit’s end.

Example of running (like running to Charleston = 120 miles)

Here the passage shifts from understanding Elijah as a risk-taking speaker to Elijah as a risk-taking listener. The angel of the Lord tells him to “get up and eat” two separate times. Elijah listens—even though he does not know what lies ahead—and is strengthened for his next journey.

Then the word of the Lord comes to Elijah, telling him to stand on the mountain while the Lord “passes by.”

A great wind surges to the point the mountains begin to break apart and rocks are splitting in half, again and again. The earth literally shakes and quakes beneath Elijah’s feet, followed by a fire.

BUT ELIJAH DOESN’T COVER HIS FACE.

Who, among you, if rocks were swirling around you, would not cover your face?

Who, among you, if fires were raging about, would not protect your face from being scorched?

All of us risk-taking communicators should be a little shocked right now, because we would like to keep our faces, especially for our line of work.

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But here is the powerful moment: Elijah only covers his face with his cloak when he encounters God in the “sound of silence.”

As the scriptures said, God was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire.

The very presence of God was in the sound of silence.

It is this still silence of God that causes Elijah to wrap his face in his cloak.

Elijah took the greatest risk by listening to God.

God responds with direct instruction: “Go.”

“Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.” Return and Go Declare what God will do...

and here’s what God will do=

(there will be no one in need among you if only you will obey the Lord your God. Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land) as Deut. 15 says.

It wasn’t until Elijah took the risk to listen to God’s still, small voice that he continued on in his terrifying journey.

Listening is risky.

Attending to the still, small voice of God is risky.

Yet, this is the inheritance of our faith as revealed through the scriptures: attending to God is risky, but it’s worth it.

How many times have we been in that situation?

How many times have we attended to the still, small voice of God and come out on the other side, realizing that it was worth it all along?

On the other hand, how many times have we intentionally ignored that voice, for fear that it might cause us to risk? For fear that it might cause us to transform?

Good listeners are risk takers.

The inheritance of our faith is to attend to God.

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To attend to God’s work and witness in the world.

To attend to Christ’s command to love God and neighbor.

To attend to the Spirit’s stirrings deep within us and in those around us.

And yes, to attend to the still, small voice of God that comes to us in the silence.

It’s that silence that causes us to cover our heads fearfully with our blanket.

And yet it is that same silence that causes us to take the risk and listen nonetheless.

To listen is to risk. To risk is to have faith!

To have faith is to trust in God and in God’s way. This is at the core of all of the readings this morning: Elijah laments the lack of it in Israel, the Psalmist is trying desperately to hold on to it and Paul deems it the heart of the matter in the text from Galatians.

Stepping onto foreign ground on the opposite side of the lake, the demons know exactly who Jesus is – Son of the Most High God! They immediately recognize his power over them. They are the ones now panicked, clarifying Jesus’ reaction on the lake to his disciples’ lack of faith.

The unnamed man the demons have had power over has been living no life at all. Estranged from any form of community due to his erratic behavior, he lives among the dead in the catacombs. His only occasional companion is a guard, and the people at their wits end can only chain and shackle him. These he breaks to be driven into the wilderness, naked. Even switching from singular to plural as he addresses Jesus regarding himself demonstrates the bonds of chaos holding him that no one can seem to break. A legion of demons torment him constantly. His is one of the bleakest existences described in scripture...a hopeless situation.

A pause here allows us to contemplate the many situations in our personal and corporate lives that we view as intractable – beyond hope. Will there ever be peace in the Middle East?

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Will our addictions to drugs, alcohol, food, fame, wealth ever be cured? Will evil in all its Legion forms be finally and forever eradicated?

Jesus’ answer in action, carried out as easily as he calmed the wild wind and waves, as easily as Creation is spoken into being at the beginning, is a resounding “YES!” Jesus’ pastoral response is to leave, without judgement or critique of the gentile’s fearful reaction. He seems to understand. But he does not leave them without a witness; a witness they know and one whose debt of gratitude runs very deep. It is unlikely he will let them forget what God has done for him in Christ Jesus. And we know that word of mouth witness can be the most trustworthy and powerful kind.

The unnamed man, known to us only as the Gerasene demoniac, both is, and is a model for, the church. We are those who are aware of our deep debt of gratitude to Christ’s saving work, who love the God we meet in Jesus and want to follow him, who go out to those we know and even those we don’t in grateful, loving, powerfully trustworthy witness to what God has done, is doing and will yet do for us. And we need not be afraid of death, as was the case with Elijah, nor demons, as the case for the Gerasene demoniac, for God is with us in the silence and in the action he calls us to carry out: Return to where you came from and go declare all that God has done for you!

Let us pray:

God in the earthquakes, God in the wind, God in the fire, God in the silence. Help us to be more attentive to your calling, to that still, small and risky voice that says Go and declare my good name and my good works without fear for I am with you always and forever. Amen.