

Prayer Grounds Us

1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22-33

So what risks must we take as individuals and as a community faith? The United Church of Canada has created a new vision where the communities of faith where we are committed to deep spirituality, bold discipleship, and daring justice. We are being called to trust in God and take risks in a time of uncertainty for the church in this world. We are being called to take prayerful risks lives that move us toward answering God's call and to making a difference in the lives of not only ourselves, but each other. We are being called to step out in faith, even in uncertain times. Jesus says to us, not once, not twice, but many times: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you."

Elijah finds guidance today from God in his time of fear, and hopefully these stories will also provide us with the strength and courage to not be afraid. We have two stories today that provide us with examples of people who clearly had faith in God, and who also faced adversity and when they did, in that moment they panicked. They were very much like all of us: very human. In a moment of adversity, we panic and we sometimes give into our fear. But when they gave into that fear, while doing so they also reached out to God and to Jesus in prayer.

Let's talk a little bit about Elijah: Elijah is a prophet, and one who at the beginning of the chapter from 1 Kings that we read today, the verses we didn't hear was that he was faced with the fury of Queen Jezebel, because Elijah had killed all of her prophets. The queen sent Elijah a message that she would retaliate and kill him. Understandable why he would panic in this moment. So he fled to Beersheba and then went further into the desert. While he was in the desert, he laid down and he began to pray. He prayed in this time of need, and God sent a messenger telling Elijah that he should go to Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai is also the place where Moses heard the voice of God in the burning bush. Elijah, being the faithful follower, went. When he got to Mount Sinai and he found a cave and went into the cave. I mean, I don't know about you, but if someone was trying to kill me, I might

hide in a cave too. So as he got there, in that cave was where he encountered God. God asked Elijah, “Why are you here?” Elijah then explained a slightly different version of what happened, of how he had been zealous and was this last prophet standing, and because of this, people wanted to kill him. Elijah was clearly panicking and not in a clear state of mind. He believed, *truly* believed that he had failed God in his ministry. But in that moment, God did not abandon him. Instead, God told Elijah to go and stand on the mountain and wait for the Lord to come. Again, Elijah listened; went up and stood there waiting for the Lord. Elijah felt this strong wind come in, and then an earthquake, and then a fire. Elijah still hadn’t seen the Lord, until there was sheer silence.

How many of us in our faith have been searching for God, hoping that God would speak to us...and maybe found, when we were still enough, to hear God in that silence, and to experience God’s presence in that silence? Elijah in that moment was acutely aware of God’s presence, and like Moses had done, he hid his face. God then gave Elijah instructions on what he was being called to do, and so Elijah did as God commanded.

Stephanie Mitchem, a theologian, suggests that “prayer’s deepest answer might be that we are not alone, whatever the circumstances.”¹ that the deepest part of our prayer, that answer that we’re searching for, is that we are not alone. Fear often appears when we feel isolated, when we feel like we’re in that cave all alone, in that darkness and that isolation and that sense of being lost. Fear can then also distract us. Fear can hold us back from answering Jesus’ call to come.

In the Gospel lesson today, we hear the story of Jesus sending the disciples out across this turbulent sea to go and do what God has called them to do while Jesus takes time to go off by himself to pray. He needed some time alone with God, away from the crowds and away from the disciples. It was in the next morning that Jesus walked across the water towards the disciples. I can picture the disciples in this stormy, tumultuous time, clinging to the sides of the boat. Worrying about what was going to happen, being scared out of their mind, when suddenly this thing appears walking on the water. A ghost! I mean, wouldn’t that scare you? Wouldn’t you start to think you were seeing things? But in that moment of panic, what did Jesus say to them? “Do not be afraid; it is I.” Peter then says, “Lord, if you command it, tell me. Come onto the water.” And so, Jesus

¹ Stephanie Mitchem, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 318.

extends his hand and says, "Come." Peter got out of the boat, started walking towards Jesus, when suddenly he went out of the moment. He wasn't present in that moment and he realized where he was. He felt the strong wind. His fear was evoked. He panicked, and in that moment, he started to sink. It was in that moment that he called out to Jesus, "Save me!" And Jesus reached out his hand and saved Peter. Peter's prayers were answered; he was not alone. Like Elijah in his moment of panic, his prayers were answered. Jesus, the Son of God, was there to lift him back to safety. Peter made a conscious decision to act on his faith and to take a risk. He asked Jesus to command him to come and he followed Jesus and he took that leap of faith. The disciples were also afraid to act on their faith. Peter knew and trusted in Jesus. He believed and knew that no matter what, Jesus would help him. Jesus would protect him.

The story reminds us of two things: that stepping out in faith is not a guarantee that we will not be faced with troubled waters or filled with fear. *And* it is accompanied by the assurance that Jesus will not abandon us. Peter was willing to take the risk that the other disciples were not. We need to remember that individuals who risk boldly and move toward the call of Jesus can make a difference in other people's lives. Can inspire other people; can deepen other people's faith. The reality is that Jesus calls us often into uncharted waters, and we need to go faithfully and trust that Jesus will not abandon us.

So what about today? What about all of us here in this space right now? What risks are you willing to take? Are you willing to go if Jesus says "come" and step out, even through you may not know where you are going? Are we committed to deep spirituality, bold discipleship, and daring justice? And are we ready to trust in God and not let fear distract us from our call and our commitment?

There is a modern day parable that I have told once or twice, but I think bears repeating today. It is about a father and his daughter, and his daughter was having a very hard time. Grade 9, life was not going well. And so, her father said, "Come with me." They went into the kitchen, and the father put three pots of water on the stove and started to let them boil. He took some carrots, some eggs, and some coffee beans. This daughter – a typical teenager – was getting a little impatient and said, "What's the point, Dad?" and he went, "Shh. Just wait." He took the carrots, put them in some water. He put the eggs in water and he put the beans in water. And

he waited. Which was making her squirm. “Dad, can you just tell me what the point of this is?” “Just wait.” So finally, after twenty minutes, he turned off the water, he pulled out the carrots, he pulled out the eggs, and he took a scoop of the water where the coffee beans had been and he put it into a glass. He asked his daughter, “What do you notice about the carrots? She’s like, “They’re really squishy.” “Yeah. How about the eggs?” “Well, they’re hard. They’re hard-boiled. What did you expect?” “What about the last one?” “It tastes like coffee. It’s pretty good.” And he said, “When you are faced with adversity, which one will you be? Will you be like the carrots that went in hard and came out all soft and squishy? Or will you be like the egg, going in fragile and unsure and coming out hardened? Or will you be like the bean that goes into the water and is transformed into something really, really good? When you face adversity, which will you be?”

Ernest Campbell, who’s a great preacher from New York City, once proclaimed at a conference, “The reason we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it.” Do you think that statement is true? Do we seem to lack faith in our time because we are not doing anything that requires it? I think the key to faith and faithfulness in the life of Christ is to follow Peter’s example and to step out of our comfort zone. Out of the security of the boat; out of the security of the sanctuary. To step out into the world, be a community of faith that goes boldly out to live out what Jesus has called us to do. This community of faith has had two congregational meetings where we have taken the risk to invest in our call and our commitment. We have created and approved a new ministry structure that we believe will help us to live out our vision over the next ten years. We have approved a budget that is a faith-based budget that invites us to work together in order to achieve what we believe God is calling us to do. Now, together, we need to create a plan and figure out how every single person who walks in these doors are a part of moving forward. We’re in this together, and which of you will be like Elijah and Peter and take that first step out for us? Remembering and trusting that God is with us always. And that we do not need to be afraid.

When Moses heard the voice of God and asked who was speaking, God told him to tell the people that “I am’ sent you”. Jesus said, “Take heart; it is I.” God is with us always. So how will we move beyond our safety? How will we step out into uncharted waters in faith, like the coffee bean, ready to be transformed and be a transforming agent in this world? Have faith, my friends, and go boldly into this world. Amen.