

“The Face of God”

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I Kings 19:1-15^a

Luke 8:26-39

The LORD said [to Elijah],

“Go out and stand at the mountain before the LORD. The LORD is passing by.”

I Kings 19:11

Let us pray... O God,

It seems that evil gets a lot of airtime much too often in our world.

The face of fear and hatred is too familiar to us. It is your face we desire to see.

Amen

The Prophet Elijah lived during confusing times –
not unlike our own.

Though the Israelites had conquered the land of Canaan centuries ago,
the ancient religion of the Canaanites was reasserting itself.

It found its way into the leadership of the northern kingdom of Israel
through the influence of King Ahab’s wife, Queen Jezebel –
who was a priestess of Ba’al.

Jezebel actively persecuted the prophets of the Israelite’s Lord God
while promoting worship of Ba’al – a word that also means ‘Lord’.

So, there was competition in the hearts and minds of the faithful
about who they should believe...

Here’s the story from I Kings about how the Prophet Elijah confronted
Jezebel’s priests of Ba’al in a contest where he discredited their god
and defeated them...

²⁰ *So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel,
and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel.*

²¹ *And Eli’jah came near to all the people, and said,
“How long will you go limping with two different opinions?
If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Ba’al, then follow him.”
And the people did not answer him a word.*

²² *Then Eli’jah said to the people,
“I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD;
but Ba’al’s prophets are four hundred and fifty men.*

²³ *Let two bulls be given to us; and let them choose one bull for themselves,
and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood,
but put no fire to it; and
I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood,
and put no fire to it.*

Willard, p.2

*²⁴And you call on the name of your god
and I will call on the name of the LORD;
and the God who answers by fire [...] is God.”
And all the people answered, “It is well spoken.”*

I Kings 18:20-24

The priests of Ba'al prepared their altar with a bull for sacrifice,
then chanted and danced, cutting themselves and
working themselves into a frenzy as they called to their god
to bring down fire – but without success.

Then, it was Elijah's turn...

Elijah prepared his bull for sacrifice, but then he even poured water
all over the altar three times, to demonstrate there was no trickery on his part.

It was a challenge that seemed to be provoking God's action,
but Elijah was acting according to God's guidance, as he said,
*“O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel,
let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant,
and that I have done all these things at thy word.*

*³⁷Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know
that thou, O LORD, art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back.”*

I Kings 18:36^b-37

Then, the fire came
and it burned up the bull, the wood, the stones, even the dust and the water;
And the people were finally convinced...

The popular vote went against the priests of Ba'al –
and since they didn't do elections back in those days,
where everybody agrees to a peaceful transition of power,
the losers were all executed.

It's a good thing times have changed, though some might prefer those simpler days
of pacifying the political opposition!

The Elijah cycle of stories has been part of our recent lectionary readings
and this story came to mind this week as I was preparing a statement
in response to the terrible events of the Pulse massacre in Orlando –
so it came as a significant coincidence that I recalled this particular verse:

*²¹And Eli'jah came near to all the people, and said,
“How long will you go limping with two different opinions?
If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Ba'al, then follow him.”
And the people did not answer him a word.*

I Kings 18:21

Willard, p.3

Our society is limping between two opinions on many issues –
gun control, gay rights, immigration, climate change, as well as the difference
between religious discrimination and religious extremism.

One issue in particular found its way onto center stage of the media
as a direct result of the tragic events in Orlando just one week ago.

Some claimed that it was inappropriate to talk about political issues
while families are mourning.

That is a very troubling line of reasoning –
which is essentially to hide behind grief as an excuse to avoid the active prayer
of fighting the culture of violence.

The time for mourning is past. The time for action is now.

When Jesus cast out a 'deaf and dumb spirit' from an epileptic child,
his disciples came to ask him later why they could not cast it out.

Jesus told them that such an enemy cannot be cast out by anything
except prayer and fasting.

That means faith and hard work –
when you're working, you're not eating.

Earlier in that story, Jesus had scolded his disciples for arguing with the scribes
kind of like the handwringing of our politicians these days.

However, I'm proud of those politicians who pointed out
that silence does not necessarily equate to prayer
and that speaking out about injustice can be a form of fasting.

We were reminded this week that it has been four years
since 20 elementary school children were killed in Newtown, CT.

We were reminded this week that it has been a year
since 9 church members were gunned down in Charleston, SC
because they were black.

We were reminded that nothing has been done to prevent guns
from getting into the hands of bigoted, mentally ill, and/or criminal people.

It is not until you put a face on a situation
that it connects at the level of belief.

It is not until you know somebody
that it makes a difference to change your thinking –
and there were plenty of faces from the Pulse nightclub to help do that.

Last Monday, I asked those who attended the "Jesus Through The Centuries" class
what was the first image of Jesus that was significant to them.

The Good Shepherd, Salman's portrait of Christ, the Crucifixion, and Jesus feeding
the 5,000 were mentioned, but there was a general response of agreement
about Jesus welcoming children.

Willard, p.4

We have a God with a face – and our God is characterized as one whom
children trust, as one who cares for the flock,
as one who feeds multitudes,
as one who is counted among the victims of violence throughout time.
We have a God with a face who is not afraid to “face” injustice
and do something about it.

Our Gospel lesson today – like Jesus’ healing of the epileptic child,
is about confronting a person possessed by evil.
There are a couple things going on in this story –
A naked, mentally ill man who was frightening and dangerous,
comes out of a cemetery to beg Jesus not to torture him.
This man was as much a victim as anyone he terrorized,
because at times he was put in chains and guarded.
He served as a scapegoat for the fears and hatred of the local citizens.
Jesus was not put off by the scary mask of this man’s insanity,
but was able to see and bring out this person’s humanity.

What happened next is embarrassing environmentally-speaking, to explain –
The Gospel of Luke says that Jesus gave the evil spirits ‘permission’
to enter a herd of pigs who then rushed like lemmings over a cliff,
creating an ecological disaster!

Whether it happened that way or not, is not important,
but what is important is that this person was relieved
from a tremendous amount of internal pain
that felt like a herd of filthy pigs in his mind.

The city people – instead of celebrating, became afraid,
because they had no scapegoat anymore, and
they would have to face their problems directly.
But they failed to see Jesus for who he was and asked him to leave
before he solved any more of their problems.
Sometimes there is a kind of security in gridlock
and having enemies that you can easily identify and blame...

The time for action is now.

Tonight at our Prayer Vigil for Pulse, we will acknowledge that
it has been a week since lives were irrevocably changed;
It has been a week since people mourned their losses, bore silent witness,
and voiced an angry witness.

The time for action is now, So, now... what?

Let me close with an adaptation to a story frequently told by Joseph Campbell
who was an expert on the sacred stories of people throughout the world...

Willard, p.5

Once, there was a flock of goats grazing in a jungle
when one day, a great She-tiger sprang upon them!
The goats scattered, but the great She-tiger was pregnant
and could not pursue them.

She gave birth through her exertion – died in the effort...
As the little flock re-gathered, they found the baby tiger cub;
And since it was in their nature to nurture others,
they adopted the cub as one of their own.

The tiger cub was accepted by the flock,
though the other kids could be cruel, laughing at the tiger-cub
who couldn't keep up on the steep mountain-sides
and who looked skinny and mangy because they only ate grass,
which is great for goats, but not so good for tigers.

One day, they were grazing on the far side of the jungle,
when a great He-tiger sprang upon the flock and scattered them
They all got away, except one – the tiger cub!

The He-tiger said,
“Who or what are you?”

The little tiger-cub said,
“Baa!”

The He-tiger said,
“What? Come with me!” and took the cub over to a still pond
and then held the cub over the water to see her reflection.

Then, the He-tiger held his face next to the cub's and said,
“See? You look like me. You're a tiger!”

The He-tiger took the cub to his den and gave her some leftover gazelle,
real tiger food on which the cub choked –
and don't we always choke on the doctrine of tradition?

Then, the little cub set back on her haunches and let out a little tiger roar
and began her life as who she was...

A loved one's face is like a mirror and God's face is like that, too,
helping us to see ourselves as we are – the 'tiger' that we really are
as God sees us and loves us, warts and stripes and all.
Jesus is God's human face challenging us to reflect his character,
giving up only what is false and hurtful, to help others do the same
and together to face the day.

Amen

The Lord bless you and keep you:

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you:

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Numbers 6:24-26

*Our scripture lesson from I Kings 19:1-15^a
tells of Elijah's fearful retreat from Jezebel into the wilderness –
and how he encountered God despite his outward circumstances...*

- ^{19:1} Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done,
how he had killed all Baal's prophets with the sword.
- ² Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah with this message:
"May the gods do whatever they want to me if by this time tomorrow
I haven't made your life like the life of one of them."
- ³ Elijah was terrified. He got up and ran for his life.
He arrived at Beer-sheba in Judah and left his assistant there.
- ⁴ He himself went farther on into the desert a day's journey.
He finally sat down under a solitary broom bush.
He longed for his own death:
"It's more than enough, LORD!
Take my life because I'm no better than my ancestors."
⁵ He lay down and slept under the solitary broom bush.
Then suddenly a messenger tapped him and said to him,
"Get up! Eat something!"
- ⁶ Elijah opened his eyes and saw flatbread baked on glowing coals
and a jar of water right by his head.
He ate and drank, and then went back to sleep.
- ⁷ The LORD's messenger returned a second time and tapped him.
"Get up!" the messenger said.
"Eat something, because you have a difficult road ahead of you."
- ⁸ Elijah got up, ate and drank, and went refreshed by that food for forty days
and nights until he arrived at Horeb, God's mountain.
⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night.
The LORD's word came to him and said,
"Why are you here, Elijah?"
- ¹⁰ Elijah replied,
"I've been very passionate for the LORD God of heavenly forces
because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant.
They have torn down your altars,
and they have murdered your prophets with the sword.
I'm the only one left, and now they want to take my life too!"
- ¹¹ The LORD said,
"Go out and stand at the mountain before the LORD.
The LORD is passing by."
A very strong wind tore through the mountains
and broke apart the stones before the LORD.
But the LORD wasn't in the wind.
After the wind, there was an earthquake.
But the LORD wasn't in the earthquake.
- ¹² After the earthquake, there was a fire.

But the LORD wasn't in the fire.

After the fire, there was a sound.

Thin. Quiet.

¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his coat.

He went out and stood at the cave's entrance.

A voice came to him and said,

"Why are you here, Elijah?"

¹⁴ He said,

"I've been very passionate for the LORD God of heavenly forces
because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant.

They have torn down your altars,

and they have murdered your prophets with the sword.

I'm the only one left, and now they want to take my life too."

¹⁵ The LORD said to him,

"Go back through the desert to Damascus and anoint Hazael as king of Aram."

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 8:26-39 [NRSV]

²⁶ Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee.

²⁷ As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him.

For a long time he had worn no clothes,
and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.

²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice,

“What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?

I beg you, do not torment me”—

²⁹ for Jesus[□] had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man.

(For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard
and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds
and be driven by the demon into the wilds.)

³⁰ Jesus then asked him,

“What is your name?”

He said,

“Legion”; for many demons had entered him.

³¹ They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

³² Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding;

and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these.

So he gave them permission.

³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine,

and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

³⁴ When the swineherds saw what had happened,

they ran off and told it in the city and in the country.

³⁵ Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus,

they found the man from whom the demons had gone

sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.

And they were afraid.

³⁶ Those who had seen it

told them how the one who had been possessed by demons

had been healed.

³⁷ Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes[□]

asked Jesus[□] to leave them; for they were seized with great fear.

So he got into the boat and returned.

³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone

begged that he might be with him; but Jesus[□] sent him away, saying,

³⁹ “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.”

So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city

how much Jesus had done for him.