

“The Forerunner”

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1 Kings 19:1-13

Mark 6:14-29

*Finally, there was a gentle breeze,
and when Elijah heard it, he covered his face with his coat.*

He went out and stood at the entrance to the cave.

The LORD asked, “Elijah, why are you here?”

1 Kings 19:12^a-13

Let us pray... O God,

Though religion has been used in our history like a chess piece,
yet your prophetic voice can still be heard.

For your people will continue to care for one another, their neighbors, and
the next generation, just as you led our ancestors to do so for us.

Amen

In my invitation to Holy Communion, I often say that
the United Church of Christ is heir to all Christian tradition, and
that’s true about the many ways to understand & perform baptism.

When I have done a baptism, I usually dip my thumb in water
and make the sign of the cross on the person’s forehead
using the Trinitarian formula in God’s name.

One time, I was asked to do a baptism by immersion.

There was a swimming pool at a local retirement community
and that was where we were going to do it.

Wanting to make sure I would do it right,

I called an evangelical minister friend of mine
who told me just how to do it:

Wearing suitable clothes and wade in waist deep,
give the person to be baptized a handkerchief to put over her face.
Then, with my left arm at her back and right hand to her left shoulder,
I lowered her into the water, dunking her briefly,
and she came back up all smiles.

That tradition survives from the earliest times when John the Baptist
was calling people into repentance, washing away their sins,
and carrying them through the waters.

It has become one of the functionary ways we recognize someone as ‘Christian’
where ministers dispense this blessing as part of their “priestly” role
along with the “pastoral” role of spiritual healing and comforting.

The activity of John the Baptist also represents the “prophetic” role
of reminding people of faith about their responsibility
to be a community of conscience.

There are consequences to taking up the “prophetic” role
of ‘comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable’
as we see in this morning’s scripture lessons...

Willard, p.2

Around the 9th Century BCE,

Elijah opposed the ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel, King Ahab,
who was compromised by his wife, Queen Jezebel.

She was a Canaanite priestess who promoted the worship of Baal –
the demonic ‘Lord of The Flies’.

So, she had other priorities that competed with those of the God of Abraham
and she twisted Ahab to her will.

Elijah contended with Jezebel’s priests in a demonstration of power
and prevailed against them through God’s intervention,
killing all of the queen’s priests as a result.

Then, Elijah prayed to God for an end to the drought that had
desolated the region for more than 3 years – and the rains came!

That did it for Jezebel ! She was so enraged, she sought to have Elijah killed
for all these humiliations, and he had to flee into the wilderness...

John the Baptist had been calling out the hypocrites of his day,
for thinking they could ‘escape the wrath to come’,
while he baptized those who did repent of their wrongdoings.

John also denounced Herod Antipas for his adulterous relationship
with his brother Phillip’s wife, Herodias.

He was arrested and later executed for this.

Soon after this event, Jesus would repeat again and again,

“The Son of Man, [the True Heir of Humanity,] must suffer and die,
but on the third day, rise!”

That is the promise of vindication for those who – like Christ,
enter the public arena to challenge institutional injustice
or who simply dare to be different
and are punished by a world that just doesn’t get who they are
or what they are trying to do.

As we strive to be authentic people, we will suffer along the way,
but with that first step towards what Jesus called ‘eternal life’,
we discover that we are already there.

We bring the Beloved Community with us –
the ‘Kingdom’ we seek, is within us.

Jesus said we had to be like a child to obtain this.

We have to be childlike...

I spoke last Sunday of Fred Rogers ... “Mister Rogers”,
and that he had something very important to say
about children’s education and TV programming.

He warned that they are being ‘bombarded’ with all kinds of
unhealthy and violent themes, and that there is a real need
to teach children how to deal with their feelings.

Willard, p.3

This approach allowed him to talk about some difficult subjects
not generally considered suitable for children under 13.
He did it in such a way that he placed the event or issue in a context,
so that evil was never allowed to stand alone,
but was placed in a context... with what is good.
The contrast that results, allows for individuals and groups,
to make up their minds without confusion or coercion.
I try to do that for you, Sunday to Sunday,
so that you recognize that God is not indifferent to us,
sitting enthroned in the heavens above.
Instead, we know through Christ, that God is accessible
and the tricky part is making ourselves accessible to God.
Evil in this world has the illusion of standing alone,
but must always be placed in a context
for its deception to be recognized.
That is what Jesus, Mister Rogers, and hopefully I seek to do...

J. Bennet Guess had been Vice President
of the UCC's Council on Health & Human Services,
and he is now Executive Director of Ohio's ACLU.
I saw a posting he made on Facebook that caught my attention.
He wrote:

*Starting in the late 70s, 80s and early 90s,
there was a concerted and contrived effort
by hateful, politically motivated people
to wrap themselves in biblical tokenism;
superficial, shallow, and self-serving "faith";
and pietistic propaganda in order to
bring down the Mainline Christian middle in this country
and render the church powerless to confront evil,
even in the church's own name.*

And he says that today, we are seeing basically the same thing
except at the level of the central values of our society
as an attack that seeks to:

*bring down the mainstream middle of our nation
and render us powerless to confront evil,
even in our nation's own name.*

Extremism breeds more extremism.

*It's all meant to control people and exclude people,
at the same time, all in the name of*

*"love of god [lower-case "g" intentional] and country."
Read your history. It's textbook exploitation of the masses.*

Willard, p.4

I reflected on this and this is what I think: God is still moving –
Jesus jumps out of the box we put him in and keeps dancing.
Here are the ways that's been happening...

Since the 1970s and on into the 21st Century CE,
mainline seminaries and theologians have been teaching about
feminist theology from Barbara Brown Zigmund and Phyllis Trible,
black theology from James Cone,
liberation theology from Gustavo Gutierrez,
the 'powers that be' from Walter Wink,
'single victim mechanism' and the 'countermyth' from Rene Girard,
the inverted Kingdom from Dominic Crossan,
the Bible 'again for the first time' from Marcus Borg,
Biblical storytelling from Tom Boomersshine,
the 'Emergent Church' from Phyllis Tickle and Brian McLaren,
and I would add the 'Zen of Seeing/Drawing'
from Frederick Franck, urging us "not just to look but see"...

There are some new voices on the horizon,
Amelia Boomersshine's "Circle of the Word" prison ministry,
and Reggie Williams' Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus,
and the UCC's Stillspeaking writers, including
Molly Baskette, Quinn Caldwell, and Mary Luti.

There are still some more voices that need to be rediscovered,
because what they said *before*, has something to say to us *now*.

In the latest Conference e-newsletter, The Rev. Dr. Raymond Hargrove,
UCC FL Conference Regional Minister for the Eastern Region, quoted
'renowned preacher and theologian' Howard Thurman, who wrote:
"Too often the price exacted by society for security and respectability
is that the Christian movement in its formal expression
must be on the side of the strong against the weak",
which is not how Christianity started out.

The 'priestly' function of religion can be co-opted to operate
like a traffic cop or even a hanging judge.

The 'pastoral' function of religion can slide away from a sincere desire to help
to seek only to control others and prey upon their infirmity.

The 'prophetic' function of religion can be corrupted to misguide
righteous indignation into ethnic hatred and terrorism.

However, if the 'prophetic' voice places justice as a pre-requisite for peace;
and the 'pastoral' hands and feet of a church put love into practice;
and the 'priestly' tradition helps them remember their origin
of God through Christ,
then, the Beloved Community can be readily seen and experienced.

Willard, p.5

What precedes the story of John the Baptist's arrest and execution,
is how Jesus' sent out his 12 disciples on their first apostolic mission.

Upon their return they will learn of John's death,
and Jesus urges them to withdraw for a time of spiritual retreat.

However, all the people from those towns that the disciples visited and helped,
went out on foot – in the thousands, to wait for them on the beach.

It is in Luke's version of this story about the disciples' return,
that we learn they were filled with excitement and brimming with stories
of their adventures, how they cast out evil spirits & healed people.

Jesus responds to them by saying,
"I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven".

Another way of interpreting this is that –
more and more, as the disciples do what Jesus had been doing
by healing, preaching, and bringing people together,
the powers of evil would be pushed out from where they don't belong...

I close with this prayer by Howard Thurman:

"Lord, help us to stand up both to
the demons that hide behind ungodly laws,
and the false religion that props up injustice.

Make us into a people who shine out your love
so that the world might know another way is possible.

Amen."

*Our lesson today from 1 Kings 19:1-13
as found in the Contemporary English Version,
tells about the risks of being a prophetic voice,
but also the support that comes to help that voice...*

¹ Ahab told his wife Jezebel what Elijah had done
and that he had killed the prophets.

² She sent a message to Elijah:

“You killed my prophets. Now I’m going to kill you!
I pray that the gods will punish me even more severely
if I don’t do it by this time tomorrow.”

³ Elijah was afraid when he got her message,
and he ran to the town of Beersheba in Judah. He left his servant there,
⁴ then walked another whole day into the desert.

Finally, he came to a large bush and sat down in its shade. He begged the LORD,
“I’ve had enough. Just let me die! I’m no better off than my ancestors.”

⁵ Then he lay down in the shade and fell asleep.

Suddenly an angel woke him up and said, “Get up and eat.”

⁶ Elijah looked around,

and by his head was a jar of water and some baked bread.

He sat up, ate and drank, then lay down and went back to sleep.

⁷ Soon the LORD’s angel woke him again and said,

“Get up and eat, or else you’ll get too tired to travel.”

⁸ So Elijah sat up and ate and drank.

The food and water made him strong enough to walk forty more days.

At last, he reached Mount Sinai, the mountain of God,

⁹ and he spent the night there in a cave.

While Elijah was on Mount Sinai, the LORD asked,

“Elijah, why are you here?”

¹⁰ He answered,

“LORD God All-Powerful, I’ve always done my best to obey you.

But your people have broken their solemn promise to you.

They have torn down your altars and killed all your prophets, except me.

And now they are even trying to kill me!”

¹¹ “Go out and stand on the mountain,” the LORD replied.

“I want you to see me when I pass by.”

All at once, a strong wind shook the mountain and shattered the rocks.

But the LORD was not in the wind. Next, there was an earthquake,
but the LORD was not in the earthquake.

¹² Then there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire.

Finally, there was a gentle breeze,

¹³ and when Elijah heard it, he covered his face with his coat.

He went out and stood at the entrance to the cave.

The LORD asked, “Elijah, why are you here?”

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

Mark 6:14-29

[Jesus had sent his 12 disciples to go 2 by 2 throughout the land,
to cast out demons and care for people – and people heard about this]

[14] King Herod heard of it; for Jesus' name had become known.

Some said,

“John the [Baptist] has been raised from the dead;
that is why these powers are at work in him.”

[15] But others said, “It is Eli'jah.” And others said,

“It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.”

[16] But when Herod heard of it he said,

“John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

[17] For Herod had sent and seized John,

and bound him in prison for the sake of Hero'di-as,

his brother Philip's wife;

because he had married her.

[18] For John said to Herod,

“It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.”

[19] And Hero'di-as had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him.

But she could not,

[20] for Herod feared John,

knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe.

When he heard him, he was much perplexed;

and yet he heard him gladly.

[21] But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet
for his courtiers and officers and the leading men of Galilee.

[22] For when Hero'di-as' daughter came in and danced,

she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl,

“Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will grant it.”

[23] And he vowed to her,

“Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.”

[24] And she went out, and said to her mother,

“What shall I ask?”

And she said,

“The head of John the [Baptist].”

[25] And she came in immediately with haste to the king, and asked, saying,

“I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

[26] And the king was exceedingly sorry;

but because of his oaths and his guests

he did not want to break his word to her.

[27] And immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard and gave orders
to bring his head. He went and beheaded him in the prison,

[28] and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl;

and the girl gave it to her mother.

[29] When his disciples heard of it,

they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.