

## Sermons at St. Luke's

*A sermon preached by the Rev. James B. Craven, III on Sunday, June 20, 2010.*

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

When I was a young boy I wanted to be a ballplayer. It was apparent early on though that if I was going to get to Yankee Stadium or the Polo Grounds, it would only be by purchasing a ticket. I never I wanted to be a prophet though. Who would? Prophets don't volunteer, they are very much called, dragged even, into that role. God does things like that, particularly in tough times. Not only does the work not pay that well, it can cost the prophet his life. Elijah understood that. Jesus too, for that matter.

There are modern prophets as well. People were once terrified of leprosy, and lepers, who had to wear bells around their necks to warn folks they were in the neighborhood, calling out "unclean, unclean" as they trudged along. Almost 140 years ago, Father Damien, a Belgian priest, was sent to minister to the leper colony at Molokai in Hawaii. Like Francis 600 years before him in Assisi, Damien was neither repulsed nor put off by lepers, but saw them as his brothers and sisters, embracing them as Christ embraced the poor, and serving as an example to the world to this day. That he died of leprosy 16 years later Damien would not have regarded as defeat. He wasn't planning to live forever anyway. Much more recently, only 25 or so years ago, do you remember Ryan White, the young boy with AIDS in Indiana, and the furor that accompanied him into the public school system? People were afraid that those who shared a classroom with Ryan White might contact AIDS. Myths about AIDS and being HIV positive, the modern counterpart to leprosy, abound today, particularly in Africa. I am optimistic though, and I really do believe the earth is round.

A modern prophet more akin to Elijah is Martin Luther King Jr. Just as Elijah's life was threatened throughout his ministry, Dr. King knew he would never

have to worry about grey hair, or no hair. In a sermon less than three weeks before he died, King said:

We built gigantic buildings to kiss the sky and gargantuan bridges to span the seas. Through our spaceships we carve highways through the stratosphere. Through our submarines we penetrate ocean depths. But it seems I hear the God of the universe saying “Even though you have done all that, I was hungry and you fed me not. I was naked and you clothed me not. I was in prison and you visited me not.”

In that last month of his life, King needed rest, he was worn out, and those closest to him worried he was about to snap. They prevailed upon him to get away from it all, just for a long weekend. So he and Ralph David Abernathy went to Acapulco. The first night Abernathy found King out on the hotel balcony and was worried he might be suicidal. It turned out King had been staring at a huge rock out in the bay, waves breaking around it. It had obviously been there for centuries, if not millennia. King began singing, “Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee,” that old hymn that is nothing less than a reverie about approaching death, about finding courage in the final hours, “when mine eyes shall close in death.”

Elijah knew too, though miraculously he avoided martyrdom. But he knew Ahab and Jezebel were after him because of his prophesying in God’s name. This is something of an Old Testament or Hebrew Bible phenomenon. Amos in his entire career preached one sermon, and was promptly run out of town.

We really know nothing of Elijah’s past, for he just appears full blown in the book of Kings, chosen and sent by God on a number of interesting and unusual missions. Elijah, go camp out, drink from the stream and God will send ravens to feed

you. Then there was the miracle of the little bit of corn meal and cooking oil, followed by the bringing of the widow's son back from the grave. After that though Elijah, still of course led by God, started annoying and publicly embarrassing those of the political establishment over their devotion to Baal, a pagan deity. Ahab knew better, he knew Baal was not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but he had a hard time controlling his wife Jezebel, the real power behind the throne. Jezebel set out to kill Elijah and it is a wonder she didn't succeed. Elijah sensibly ran from her, ran straight to God in his despair. He thought the end was near and resigned himself to death. He may even have recited Psalm 42 as we did earlier. Then an angel, and remember that angel means divine messenger, not some birdman with wings, came to him with food and drink, and urged him to eat hearty for a long journey to Mount Horeb, better known as Mount Sinai. There are angels here in this place today. Up on the mountain, he hides from Jezebel in a cave reminiscent of the cleft of the rock in which Moses stood when God passed by. Again, "Rock of ages, cleft for me, when mine eyes shall close in death." Elijah, like Moses before him, heard a voice telling him to go out from the cave, from the safe place, and stand before The Lord.

Safe places are just that, safe, and often cozy and warm, but sometimes we don't have the luxury of staying in safe places. Dietrich Bonhoeffer could have remained in New York, in his graduate work at Union Seminary, when the war in Europe broke out in 1939. He was called of God though and knew his place was at home in Germany, as priest and prophet. And so it was, but it cost him his life.

Mike Murphy, a young naval officer, was in a safe place, relatively speaking, in a mountain cave in the middle of nowhere in Afghanistan, protected with the Sailors he led, but two of them were seriously wounded, so he had to get the word out for a

medevac helicopter to come to their rescue. His radio though would not send an adequate signal from inside the cave, that safe place, he would have to go out of the cave, out from that safe place, out into the open to send his radio SOS. He knew it might well cost him his life, and it did. The Taliban forces mowed him down, but after he got the radio message out, and those he had led were rescued. As the Coast Guard search and rescue folks say, “you have to go out, you don’t have to come back.”

So Elijah too went out from his safe place in the cave. And then, as with Moses the Exodus, the Lord passed by, but in divine disguise, almost metaphorically. There was a powerful gale force wind, but the Lord wasn’t in the wind. There an earthquake. Not there either, nor in a consuming fire. We begin to wonder how Elijah survived all this, but these are matters of faith, not science. After the fire came a still small voice, nothing less than the still small voice of God. Who would have thought to look there rather than in the dramatic exhibitions of power? Who would have thought to find God’s son nailed to a cross, executed as a criminal like the fellow shot by the firing squad in Utah the other night. Remember that on Palm Sunday the welcoming cheering crowd in Jerusalem expected the Messiah on a white horse, heading armed battalions to drive out the Roman occupiers. God turns things upside down sometimes, just to keep us honest and awake.

In the Jewish passover liturgy a place at the seder table is set for Elijah, with a glass of sacramental wine poured for him. The prophet Malachi 2500 years ago foretold that Elijah would return to this earth, “and he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers.” I know you wondered how I was going to work Father’s Day into this. The last time I preached on

this Hallmark day, one of the lessons covered the email Bathsheba sent David, “Guess what? Happy Father’s day,” but I digress.

Non-biblical stories about Elijah have abounded through the ages, of how he would instantly appear to one in trouble or danger who called out to him. He might appear as a camel driver rescuing a lost traveler in the desert, or he might fly through the air to save a robbery victim hurled off a mountain ledge like Superman. Or, he might be encountered as a street beggar, to save the soul of a terminally ill wealthy man by giving him a last chance to perform an act of charity, of caring or caritas. Elijah, as the God who sent him, is not always readily recognized. In much the same way we have been known to pass Christ by too. Peter did and I have. We are only human, you and I and Peter, so we will on occasion do that. We just have to resolve to do better, and not to pass Christ by again.

This is not always easy, for things and folks are not always what they appear to be at first glance, or they change or are changed, by unseen hands, maybe angelic even, or divine. Just imagine the reaction of the crowd in Galilee when the truly crazy fellow we met in the Gospel account from Luke today made his entrance. Naked, babbling nonsensically, bound with chains, a man possessed, literally, in short crazy as a loon and unattractive and obnoxious to boot. Some remember this story as the origin of deviled ham, when Jesus commanded the demons to leave the poor guy, and they entered a bunch of pigs instead, whereupon the pigs ran over a cliff, lemming-like. Again, these are matters of faith, not science. Anyway, Jesus absolutely healed the guy, and the total change in the man scared folks. Change does that, and heaven knows I am as opposed to it as anyone, particularly in baseball. The next thing we

know, he wants to accompany Jesus in his ministry, but Jesus sends him home to be an example to others.

To paraphrase Paul in his letter to the Galatians, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither Palestinian nor Israeli, neither crazy nor sane, neither male nor female, neither straight nor gay, for we are all one in Christ Jesus, we are Christ's, his hands and feet, now in the time of this mortal life. And as such we are bound not to stay in our safe places but to dare to go out and be Christ to others, even in harm's way. Life is too short to do otherwise, thanks be to God.

Amen.

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20 June 2010