

Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 14

RCL Lectionary, Year B

1 Kings 19:4-8 / Psalm 34:1-8 / Ephesians 4:25-5:2 / John 6:35, 41-51

August 9th, 2009

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Starting Over

by **The Rev. Richard E. Helmer**

The context of our Hebrew Scriptures story today is one of the end of a great drought – both in real terms for an ancient agricultural people, and in spiritual terms, as people have turned away from God towards an old cultic deity named Ba'al. Actually, there are many Ba'als in the ancient world – generally they were gods of particular cities, and up until the ninth century before the Common Era, Ba'al was almost synonymous with Yahweh in ancient Israel.

So the distinction that is made in 1 Kings between Ba'al and Yahweh is a seminal moment for the People of God, and it comes to a head just preceding today's story. Elijah, the last living prophet of God not in hiding – a sort of tough-man prophet in some of our favorite sacred stories, demonstrates the power of Yahweh over Ba'al. It's nothing less than a head-to-head contest worthy of coverage on ESPN: a race between the prophets to offer a sacrifice that will demonstrate their respective god's power.

So the prophets of Ba'al and Elijah each build an altar to their god, but Ba'al fails to respond. Just to drive the point home, Elijah soaks his altar with water. Yahweh does indeed come, sending down fire to consume Elijah's altar, and the people are awestruck. And so, at Elijah's command, in one of the bloodiest moments in all of Hebrew scripture, they kill four-hundred-fifty prophets of Ba'al in a few short verses. It's a sort of "clash of the Titans" moment of the ancient text, an olympian turning point in ancient Israel's religious history. . .and the drought breaks, and King Ahab races ahead of the floods to share the news.

The infamous Jezebel, powerful through her cunning and her marriage to the King, is outraged at the death of the prophets of her god. So she threatens Elijah's life, and he turns tail flees into the wilderness. Ashamed – probably of his own fear -- and quite likely exhausted, the tough-man prophet lies down beneath a broom tree – a ubiquitous desert shrub – and asks God to take his life. It is a strange thing that Elijah will stand up to the 450 prophets of Ba'al, but not to Jezebel. There's enough probably there for another dozen sermons. But more to the point for today, what does it mean for us when Elijah, the greatest prophet since Moses, considers throwing in the towel?

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This week, as many of you know, the Vestry and I hit a brick wall with our housing agreement where it intersected with the bank's guidelines and extensions for closing the deal. The whole thing derailed and fell off the escrow tracks. My family and I lost our bid on the condominium we had been planning for over several weeks. Everything we had worked so hard for seemed to lay in ruins. For a while, I felt so tired, I blanched at the prospect of starting over with the mountains of paperwork, the painstaking search for a new potential home in Mill Valley, another go-around of careful deliberations over agreements, contracts, and promissory notes, and all that anxious waiting that comes with the territory of house hunting. I felt, for a time, like laying down underneath a broom tree and swearing off the whole thing.

And for a moment in that disappointment, I saw and felt the dreams of many: derailed, down-sized, delayed in our world right now. That awful sense of having to start over. . .or more accurately, start over *if you can!*

I think of all the struggles of our sisters and brothers at this time as the economy grinds along the floor of a possible turnaround: those out of work, those losing their homes, those struggling simply to make ends meet.

People have started showing up at my office door – people I have never met before – because the state funds that help them get everything from prescription medication to dental care are completely gone now, cut from the budget, and they may never come back. Their struggles quickly put everything I’m experiencing back into perspective, and yet, I and the church I serve – not just this parish, but the wider church – does not yet even have a grasp of how best to help people in this situation. Because we are no longer talking about the kind of occasional help to get people back on their feet. We’re talking about a long, protracted, and seemingly irreversible situation of financial need for the foreseeable future. How do we address that? Where do we begin? Where do we, as the People of God, start over?

In a way, we are all starting over. Most of us – in truth all of us – aren’t quite sure how the world is going to look when this big mess of ours that we call an economy turns around. All we know is that it will look very different from the one that was before the recession began. It already looks very different, and most of us are still trying to figure out how to live with that. Next we have to figure out how best to serve in that.

We are living in a world a bit like Elijah’s as the drought breaks and yet the prophets are all but gone, facing almost certain doom, hands empty. It seems like a dead end. Elijah doesn’t feel he has the strength to start over. Might as well give it up. When so many of us reach such existential turning points in our lives, we feel like Elijah. It is indeed tempting – if only for a few moments – to find our own broom tree, lay down, and swear off the whole thing.

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When Jesus speaks in today’s passage from John, we are deep into some of the great eucharistic theology of the fourth Gospel. Christ’s words about the offering of himself as food for the world is met with bewilderment because it describes a new reality that no one can quite grasp or understand. In a way, Jesus is talking about starting over. But not starting over with the old way of being. . .not with the old way of relying on our own mettle, our own energy and strength.

Rather it’s about starting anew in a reality built not on human endeavor but upon God’s unwavering grace. A grace that invites us to see, touch, and taste, the stuff of eternal life. To partake of a food that will sustain us for the next stage of the journey.

Likewise, Elijah is awakened from his slumber by an angel and offered food to sustain him, brought to him in the middle of nowhere. And when at last he partakes, he is led to the mountain of God, walking in the footsteps of his ancestors in a forty-day journey that will echo throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition. He will meet God there – a God who will transform and lead Elijah to start over in a new way. He will call Elisha to be his student, and a new group of prophets will gather around him. While kings rise and fall, and battles wax and wane, the faith in God will be carried forward into a new day by a new people: a new people sustained by God’s grace, and God’s grace alone.

Elijah’s story and Christ’s words intersect today at this table. This table we return to week after week to receive food for our journey. As strange and mysterious as it might seem, a morsel of bread and a sip of wine are meant to sustain us as we start over, to fill us with grace as we roll up our sleeves and get back to it, to renew our strength as we prepare our journeys in the wilderness. And so we return, week after week, to be reminded of this strange and wonderful practice that sits at the very heart of our tradition: broken bread, and a shared cup.

Lying beneath the broom tree, as so many of us do from time-to-time, ready to swear off life, we can find ourselves on the edge of despair, like Elijah. But we are reminded by this story today, even in those moments, we needn’t fear. God’s grace is given for us to eat and partake – even in the wilderness – and we are promised sustenance so we can get up, dust off, and move forward. We are promised grace to lead us to a new day, a day renewed, a day built not on our own efforts, but on the grace abundant and overflowing . . .nourished in that primordial eucharist of Christ's self-offering. . . renewed with life beyond time, so that we may with hope, and renewed joy, start over.