June 30th , 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Sixth Sunday of Eastertide

10:30 am

The Parlour Trick

This week, I was reading about a pastor, the Rev. James Hopkins, who served in a city in California. One week, a newspaper editor was murdered and the nineteen year old who was arrested for the crime apparently was trying to prevent the editor from doing any further research into a religious group – a group that may have been making money through fraud, conspiracy, and/or extortion. This young man, convicted, told the police that he was, “a good soldier.”

It’s language that we’ve heard before, sometimes in extreme settings but sometimes in your regular Sunday morning Bible study. Be a warrior for God, be a soldier in the army of Christ – and this language does two things, at least for me – on one hand, it speaks to a real faithfulness towards God, but it also speaks highly in militaristic language that incites thoughts like violence and crime. Language, as I’ve preached before, is a very serious and meaningful means to transport ideas.

When this young man said that he was a good soldier for God, the Rev. Hopkins responded by writing, “It is imperative that every congregation and faith-based organization in our city rethink the way we use terms like soldier, warrior, army, conquer, and battle. These militaristic terms are not helpful in conveying the need for our people to be peacemakers. They have proved to be subject to misuse. We need students of God, followers of God, and seekers of God.” How profound is language – that using words like ‘student, follower, seeeker’ rather than ‘soldier or warrior’ has when we live in such a diverse world and polarized climate.

II. The Soldiers of Baal

As it turns out, Elijah was living in a polarized society, to an extreme. There he was, one man, one prophet – alongside 450 worshippers of Baal. And he has a political climate directly against his own – these worshipers of Baal are under the political regime of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. So what is a man to do? What is the prophet of God going to do?

He sets up, what I think, is the best kind of parlour trick. By using the regular scene of altar worship, Elijah is going to prove that his God is the real God. And this is good and bad advice, because while Elijah will prove some miraculous site, he also comes off a bit arrogant. Before I go anywhere else with this story, I think I want to warn us against that.

In our polarized society, it’s easy to say in very black-and-white terms, ‘this is what is real, this is what is concrete, this is what is comfortable.’ ‘I’m right, you’re wrong.’ ‘My God is God and that’s it.’ Or for Elijah, it’s almost this kind of, ‘My God’s better than your god, na-na-na-na-boo-boo.’ Not the kind of humility you’re really seeking out of God’s prophet. He also, as you heard the story, kind of taunts the Baal worshippers by poking them, saying things like, ‘Maybe you’re god is sleeping, or maybe your god is meditation, or maybe he has wandered away. Cry louder!’ Not cool, Elijah, not cool. But, as it turns out, Elijah, while prophet, is human too – even this trustworthy and bold man has a humanity that gets a bit arrogant and prideful. And it’s tempting for us to follow suit, to claim that as an example, because it’s easy. I think the fact that Elijah is acting this way is moreso a way of God saying – the prophet is human, and has some poor human qualities sometimes – but even those who aren’t perfect can do some pretty amazing and prophet work for God.

III. Symbolism is a Powerful Thing

Now that we’ve delved deeper into Elijah as a human being and prophet, I want to focus upon symbolism. Language is very meaningful, but symbolism is as well – and can often transmit and transform our understandings through the ages. Let’s look at some of the symbolism used in this text.

So, here’s the irony of ironies. This context we are in is an agrarian society that live and breaths by the weather – the sun, the rain, and everything good that feeds the earth so that plants may grow and livestock may flourish. These folks are incredibly dependent upon weather. The problem is, that these folks have seen a draught for three years – so things are bad, things are languishing, and hope is getting smaller and smaller and despair is getting greater and greater. Now here’s your irony – Baal – Baal was known to be the ‘god of storms’ or the ‘rider of the clouds.’ So, you have no storms, you have no clouds, you have no rain – but you’re still worshipping a god, Baal, who apparently has complete control over giving you water...that you haven’t had for three years. Strange. But suitably ironic and strengthens the symbolism.

So, as we hear, all the chants and crying and all the noises that come out of the 450 people do not get Baal to show up and light the fire under the bull. It doesn’t happen. And then Elijah asks these folks to come over to his altar, and creates even more symbolism in hand with ironies. He lays down 12 stones, those recognizing the 12 tribes of Israel. He has the people throw a total of 12 jars of water on the wood, so much that everything is soaked, even the trench around the altar. Elijah uses water – water that is in very high demand, and it seems incredibly wasteful, because people know implicitly that fire and water do not go together, but moreso there’s a draught.

We know it too – go to any campsite and try to light a fire with damp wood and no extra resources – we know this is going to cause frustration. You might as well go inside and turn on the oven, because that fire isn’t going to light.

The 450 people look on, because Elijah is asking the very impossible of God – to light a fire out of nowhere with flooded wood. And Elijah looks up and calls on God to answer him, and before these people, a completely divine experience, the flames come upon the altar and the fire burns brightly. And in that moment, eyesight gives insight – and the people fall down and claim Elijah’s God as their own.

In that fire, the impossible fire, we claim that God is stronger than any impossibility. And in the night of these people’s despair, of faith, of draught, of longing – God burns the fire brightly and restores hope.

IV. The Lessons

In this text, there is so much we can learn and take and transform and apply to our lives. Here’s just a few of those things – we learn that God conquers even the deepest despair and lights the impossible fire, and gives hope to the hopeless. We learn that discernment is important – that we are a people called not to rely on our political leaders alone for our religious beliefs, but to truly discern where God is working in the world and what is right and holy. We also learn that we don’t have to be perfect to be prophets – Elijah was a bit arrogant, Elijah was human, but he did some fantastic ministry that changed peoples beliefs and lives. As it turns out, as human as you and I are – we also have the same capacity for God to work in us and through us to do what we thought would otherwise be impossible.

So there’s many lessons to learn and many things more to take from the text than I could even preach upon today, but the beautiful thing about preaching is that I do not need to determine what the lesson is for you today. That’s the Holy Spirit’s job. Your job is to find out what resonates, what part of this text is calling you to confront or challenge or affirm your faith. May we be so bold, may we be so brave, to listen to the Spirit’s lessons for us today. Amen.