

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 7, Year C

First Reading

(Track One)

1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." (And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.") And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." And the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. (ESV)

(Track Two)

Isaiah 65:1–9

I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me;
I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me.
I said, “Here I am, here I am,”
to a nation that was not called by my name.
I spread out my hands all the day
to a rebellious people,
who walk in a way that is not good,
following their own devices;
a people who provoke me
to my face continually,
sacrificing in gardens
and making offerings on bricks;
who sit in tombs,
and spend the night in secret places;
who eat pig’s flesh,
and broth of tainted meat is in their vessels;
who say, “Keep to yourself,
do not come near me, for I am too holy for you.”
These are a smoke in my nostrils,
a fire that burns all the day.
Behold, it is written before me:
“I will not keep silent, but I will repay;
I will indeed repay into their lap
both your iniquities and your fathers’ iniquities together,
says the LORD;
because they made offerings on the mountains
and insulted me on the hills,
I will measure into their lap
payment for their former deeds.”

Thus says the LORD:
“As the new wine is found in the cluster,
and they say, ‘Do not destroy it,
for there is a blessing in it,’
so I will do for my servants’ sake,
and not destroy them all.
I will bring forth offspring from Jacob,
and from Judah possessors of my mountains;
my chosen shall possess it,

and my servants shall dwell there. (ESV)

Second Reading

Galatians 3:23-29

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 8:26–39

Then they sailed to the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. When Jesus had stepped out on land, there met him a man from the city who had demons. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he had not lived in a house but among the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him and said with a loud voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.” For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many a time 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 desert.) Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Legion,” for many demons had entered him. And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss. Now a large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, and they begged him to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and drowned.

When the herdsmen saw what had happened, they fled and told it in the city and in the country. Then people went out to see what had happened, and they came to Jesus and 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. And those who had seen it told them how the demon-possessed man had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked him to depart from them, for they were seized with great fear. So

he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him. (ESV)

Questions and Comments for Discussion

First Reading (Track 1, 1 Kings)

I’ve always been fascinated by Elijah. Fascinated and confused. He’s such a jumble of passion for the Lord and anger and jealousy and self-pity. And this particular passage has always eluded me to some degree. Elijah doesn’t really seem to reply to the Lord’s question, “Why are you here?” Okay, so he’s been jealous for the Lord. But all alone? I think not. I mean, only a chapter earlier he met Obadiah who is also a servant of the Lord and someone who hid 100 of the Lord’s prophets from Jezebel. And Elijah knows that. So what’s this whining about being the only one left?

This year I came to some new thoughts about poor Elijah. (Why, Lord, didn’t they come when I was preaching every week?) Elijah was full of courage when he faced Ahab, when he set up the trial by fire for himself and 450 of Ba’al’s prophets. Then just because Jezebel threatens him he runs away. Why?

Because he knew he’d messed up. In his zeal for the Lord he couldn’t let things go with the proof that the Lord was the God of Israel. He had all the people chanting, “The Lord, He is God,” over and over, but that isn’t enough. He is full of righteous anger and so he becomes the mirror of Jezebel and puts 450 of her prophets to the sword.

And when he realizes what he’s done, and that Jezebel is now after him, he runs away. Because he feels cut off from the Lord, because he sees his violence for what it was, his violence, not the Lord’s. He has rendered himself unqualified to speak for the Lord, to enjoy the Lord’s protection, so he runs away.

This passage then says two things to me. First, be careful that my zeal for the Lord doesn’t lead me to act out of my own anger. It’s easy to do.

There is this tendency in large chunks of the church to erase any anger from God. And the reason for that is clear. It’s easy to confuse God’s wrath with our own and then do what Elijah did, become a mirror of the violence we hate and God hates. And yes, God hates that violence. But that doesn’t mean we get to erase His wrath from the Bible or from Him.

(No, it seems to me we need more of that passionate anger, but directed against the principalities and powers, not against our brothers and sisters. But by rejecting holy anger altogether, our own sneaks in and poisons most of what we try to do. I used to teach non-violent communication at week-long retreats called “Making Peace” we ran up in Pennsylvania. And you’d be surprised at how angry the pacifists who came to our retreats got at me when I pointed out to them how violent their rhetoric was.)

The difficult piece is that we seem determined to confuse other people with the object(s) of His anger. His anger burns hot, “like a refiner’s fire” but never against His children. Only against that which harms them. And that goes for oppressors as well as the oppressed.

And so, when the Lord finds Elijah huddled and helpless in the wilderness, deeply torn by the way he has become that which he hates, the Lord takes him up to Horeb to restore him. He shows Elijah the wind and the earthquake and the fire, all symbols of His holy wrath, but does not speak from them. He speaks from the quiet. And He gives to Elijah a new commission, to anoint a new king and a new prophet to guide Israel. And yes, God tells Elijah that the violence will continue (not that He’ll do it, just that it will happen), but out of it, He also says that He’ll preserve 7000. (That’s later in the chapter)

So yes, the passage cautions me against confusing my own anger with God’s, and confusing God’s wrath against that which harms His children with my anger at the children themselves, but it also tells me another thing. Even a misstep as heavy as Elijah’s does not disqualify. God doesn’t abandon us just because we’ve gone wrong. It may take some time. (It took Elijah 40 days just to reach Horeb.) but He restores us and puts us back on the path He’s laid out for us. And just as the shepherd pursues the lost sheep, God pursued Elijah deep into the wilderness to find and restore him.

So, when’s the last time you got your anger and God’s mixed up? How has God restored you?

(Track 2, Isaiah)

Our reading from Isaiah this week seems to echo certain portions of the track one text from 1 Kings. It is God’s response through the prophet to a people who are utterly undone by the situation in which they find themselves.

The texts of chapters 63-66 of Isaiah have been the subject of a good deal of scholarly disagreement as to their date of origin, but I think the most convincing argument puts them firmly in the “first Persian period,” that is the time when God’s people first returned to a destroyed Jerusalem, before the construction of the Second Temple.

Whether you prefer the scholarly approach to dating the third section of Isaiah or choose to believe (as I prefer) that Isaiah may have spoken from centuries earlier to a time he did not fully comprehend, these chapters clearly appear to be intended for a people in the kind of distress that this return caused. It is worth reading chapters 63 and 64 of Isaiah at this point to get some idea of the lament to which God responds in chapters 65 and 66, from which our reading is taken.

These last two chapters of Isaiah are filled with a panoply of new metaphors describing God's relationship to the people that seek to reorient a people whose sense of self and place in the world have been razed by the events of the Babylonian invasion and captivity. Images of warfare and violence are juxtaposed with those of tender mercy and maternal compassion. God reaches out through the prophet to provide new language to those whose words have been stolen by the events they've been through.

In our reading from this week God begins by answering the question posed by the people at the end of the last, "Will you restrain yourself at these things, O LORD? Will you keep silent, and afflict us so terribly?" God responds as a wounded supplicant, "I have been here all along, not silent, crying 'Here I am, Here I am!'" The issue lies not with God and God's inaction, but with the people's unresponsiveness, their rejection of God. Yahweh goes on to promise restoration and relationship that is grounded in God's character, not in God's location. (The missing Temple.)

This week I came across a fascinating article that concerns itself with the way that the flood of metaphors in chapters 65 and 66 of Isaiah functions to give the people new words of hope in the face of utter disorientation and desolation that has stolen language. I recommend it to your consideration. Here's the [LINK](#).

As a "so what" response to what I've written so far about our Isaiah text, I think that many of you who read these posts may also be experiencing some disorientation with the way that the United States (and other nations seem poised to follow suit) has shifted so suddenly towards authoritarianism. Values of tolerance, inclusiveness and mercy have been replaced in many quarters by their opposites. It is like we live in a different land from the one we knew. Some of us may be wondering, "Will you remain silent, O God?" Our text from Isaiah for this week may offer some insight into God's response. "I have been here all along, but you rejected me." In the midst of temptation to despair, we might also turn to the other images from the closing chapters of Isaiah, wherein God comes to us as both warrior and comforting mother.

Second Reading

I love this passage from Galatians. Paul gets awfully feisty in this letter, and there are points where I could do without his temper, but in this short passage he reveals something that is enormously powerful and important about what is to be “in Christ.”

I’m talking about this sentence, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

I’d like you to take a careful look at the conjunctions in that sentence. “Nor,” “nor,” “and.” Why doesn’t Paul say “male nor female?” There’s a very good reason for this. Paul is walking his readers backward through the three great distinctions in salvation history. There is neither Jew nor Greek.” That is the current great distinction, and the one with which Paul is wrestling most in this letter. Then Paul steps back into the history of God’s relationship to humankind, to the next greatest moment in that relationship, to the Exodus. And the distinction there? Slave and free. All of God’s people are enslaved, and set free. And finally Paul steps back even farther to the moment of the origins of God’s relationship to humankind, to the Creation. “Male AND female, created He them.” THAT is why the conjunction changed, because Paul is pointing out that in Christ we go back to the time of the Garden and, as he carefully points out, in that first moment, we were created male and female. That is, the first Adam was both, until Eve was taken from him so that they might enjoy relationship.

The ramifications of this new reality are enormous. Quite apart from the state of grace we enjoy as those restored to the state of the first Adam, this truth renders so many distinctions among us moot. It doesn’t mean they’re not real, but they no longer rise to the level of defining our identities. Think of how many questionable descriptions we have of ourselves that lose their power over us when we realize that Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross restored us to our place in the Garden, unmarked by any identity other than of a child of the Most High God.

I have deliberately avoided giving examples of the distinctions and differences I’m thinking of so that I won’t color your response to this question: What identities do you carry around that are no longer meaningful in light of the truth of the Gospel?

Gospel Text

I’m taken this week, as I have been in other years, with the reaction of the people to the miracle. I can’t think of another time that Jesus healed someone where the people who were in the vicinity asked Jesus to leave afterwards.

Why would they do that? Why would we do that?

Jesus comes into town and is confronted by someone so strong that nothing they do can control him. The people have given up trying to do anything about him. He's just too strong. But Jesus deals with him. Restores him to his right mind and even finds clothes for him. And they want nothing to do with it.

Here's my take. I don't know if I want someone around who's so powerful that I don't have any excuses for not dealing with the hard things in my life. I've gotten accustomed to life as it is, and if it's true that it all could be different, all could be better if I'd only acknowledge the power that is available to me, then I don't have any reason not to change them. But I don't like change that much, and I don't know what a future without all my shackles looks like so, well, no thank you. I'm terrified of being that free.

Thing is, I'm pretty sure that Jesus can still handle the "impossible things" we're up against these days. I've seen the sick healed, the lame walk, the oppressed set free, and I'm pretty sure I don't have any excuses for putting up with the suffering going on around me. And sometimes it's easier just to push Jesus into the background in my life than it is to work alongside Him and be confronted daily by the unnecessary pain and sorrow that I can't help seeing when He's around.

Boy, I didn't like writing that. It's very uncomfortable knowing what I could be doing and I'm not. I guess I hope it makes you uncomfortable too. Misery loves company, I suppose.