

Can God be trusted? A sermon preached on July 1, 2018 at St. Giles Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder. Beginning of a summer series on Elijah.

Lessons; I KINGS 17:1-16

I CORINTHIANS 1:26-31

There is one genre of film that holds little or no personal interest – and that is the Hollywood western.

However, there is one theme of westerns that I continue to find worth watching.

It is the western where the stranger rides into town to clean up corruption and injustice,

To deal firmly and finally with the corrupt town officials and their lackies

Or the equally corrupt landowner or cattle baron.

This morning we begin a short series not on a Biblical 'western' per se

But the life and times of a Biblical person who comes from literally nowhere of importance

And who enters the ruler (one King Ahab's world) and tells Ahab -you are a marked man

Your country is a marked country.

You have crossed the line with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and you and your country is going to pay for this!

The level of corruption – religious and social – is now intolerable!!!

As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word (vs.1)

If the declaration from this stranger is true
Then it has dire consequences for the land and its people.

For Israel is dependent upon water for life and for food.

And in King Ahab's case the declaration is a clear threat to his leadership – the famine if the drought is long standing

--the undercutting of the legitimacy and power of the recently introduced worship of the Canaanite god, Baal.

For you see, Baal is the god of fertility, rain and vegetation.

Baal worshippers claimed Baal to be the rider of the clouds, \

The storm god who controlled the rain and the crops

If the rain does not fall – the crops will not grow.

So, where is Baal if this happens?

Baal would take offense at the stranger's declaration
Baal would have to be appeased.

Would the people stand for more sacrifices of children and newborn babies to appease Baal?

You see, by the time the stranger – the prophet Elijah – makes his declaratory promise in King Ahab’s throne room,
 The worship of Israel’s one and only God – the one who had brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt and into a new and promised land – had been side barred in many areas of Israel
 And replaced with this new earthier, more primal, more sensual god, Baal.
 And to make things more difficult for Ahab, it had been his Canaanite wife, Jezebel, who had been largely responsible for introducing Baal worship into Israel.

As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word (vs.1)

I wonder how King Ahab reacted to this declaration.

I wonder what there was about the stranger standing before Ahab that made Ahab take the words seriously – tone, stance, volume, steely eyes, just mere presence, the specific naming of the God of Israel – triggered some memory in Ahab!

The declaration and the promise has placed Elijah the Tishbite from Tishbe in Gilead on a collision course with the King of Israel – Ahab
 And his wife Jezebel – a particularly nasty piece of work is Jezebel as we shall see.

Now, having empowered Elijah to challenge King Ahab on his own turf so to speak, the logical course of action might be to push the matter to its completion – put the pressure on Ahab and Jezebel

BUT God does not always follow human logic and explanations – for God knows the whole drama – we do not!

God knows what lies ahead for Elijah – Elijah does not.

God knows the immediate future is going to demand of Elijah a complete and unshakeable trust in God.

The trust in the living Lord is already there in Elijah's life – it just needs to be honed and fine-tuned.

And so,

Knowing that Elijah is now in mortal danger

God sends Elijah eastward to the Wadi Cherith – the Cherith river bed

There continues the Lord; the ravens will feed you (interesting choice of food providers – for in nature ravens are scavengers for themselves, not to share And they are not the cleanest bird in the world)

As well, there will be water in the wadi for you to drink.

The time is not yet Elijah

You have things to think about

You need time to strengthen your trust in God

You need a time to do without
 You need a time where you are not in the
 limelight – and challenging Ahab in the palace has
 put you in the limelight!

It will be a time of waiting, a time perhaps where
 you are disappointed that you cannot move ahead
 and “do stuff”.

The text tells us **that Elijah went and did
 according to the word of the Lord**

Laudatory!

Commendable!

I wonder though if there was somewhere in Elijah’s
 mind the questions of why now? Why me?

I have shown I trust you Lord – it’s no little
 feat to walk into a king’s place and say what I said.
 Let’s not delay – let’s follow through Lord and
 make good on the promise.

Let’s fast track the drought

Bottom line though from God’s view – Elijah
 needs further training, further discipleship training
 in an obscure, almost secret place,
 If he is to be personally fitted again for God in
 public

I wonder how many of us would say nothing,
 except “yes sir” to such a clear command of God.
 I wonder how many of us would accept such an
 assignment from God with such immediate
 obedience.

For it is easier than one might think to become
 addicted to love being in the spotlight
 To feel indispensable to God's plan
 To believe our way IS God's way!

I have a growing conviction that:

- a. Each one of us experience "Wadi Cherith" times in our lives – times of living or at least feeling we are living in obscurity; disappointing times, learning to do without times, discovering how little we understand and how much we do not know times;
- b. God either causes these times to happen as he does in I Kings 17 with Elijah or more commonly works through such times to help us trust in him with a deeper, more extensive and more unquestioning trust

I believe that this is the case because the case because the scriptures are heavily peppered with calls, challenges and affirmations ABOUT TRUSTING GOD

For example, I believe the centurion's cry **I believe, not help my unbelief** is a cry we know and with which we are all too familiar!

I also believe God causes or works in such Wadi Cherith times – because I can point to clear personal and professional examples that this is so.

Let me share with you a story.

Many years ago, as I greeted parishioners and visitors prior to worship at the smaller of the two churches I served in New Brunswick, Two visitors – ladies, en route to the ferry to PEI – were grateful for “church” en route to their holiday. They then told me about how much they were appreciating the ministry of their new minister I knew the church from whence they had come – big in size, programmes and membership – and thought --certainly a far cry to my 18-20 regular attenders that morning.

Would you by chance know our minister?

Yes actually I do – he was a classmate at Knox College! We graduated the same year

Though the two ladies did not say it, their facial expressions and body language conveyed – “Really,

What have you done or how incompetent are you to be “stuck” in a place like this, rather ministering in a church like ours!

How come you are not a minister in a “big church”? Indeed! How come!!!

I must confess that their question haunted and unnerved me more than it ought

It played into my ego of I deserve better than this – even though this was a lovely situation with many challenges in ministry and great people.

But I began to feel that I was better than this.

And as a result became embittered and resentful for this obscurity in which I thought I was doing the Lord's work

Over the course of a longer than needful time – owing to being in self – with God's help – and I don't say that lightly or to say – look at me and some encouraging, but tough talk from mentors and their prayerful support I came to a number of conclusions

1. God is there – even the shadows of obscurity – working, forming, molding us to be the people we are meant to be in his eyes.
2. Sometimes in the “wadi Cherith” experiences of our lives we can immediately point to lessons or truths God is teaching us about Himself, or about us or about our relationship with others.

Within weeks after my conversation with the visiting ladies, I was reminded why I was where I was, doing what I was doing, Though I know the principles in the matter would be taken aback if they saw themselves akin to ravens feeding someone in perceived obscurity.

3. Most of the time, it is as *we look back on the Wadi Cherith experiences of our lives*; the times of obscurity, disappointment,, waiting for something to happen, feeling useless that we can see the lessons; the truths; the maturing

from the experience that God has taught us or has caused us to realize.

If I had the opportunity to know and realize then, what I know now, I would say to those two visiting ladies that morning

- I am glad you appreciate your minister. Continue so to do – all ministers need encouragement and prayer.
- Big though it not necessarily better
- I have ministered and continue so to do in congregations who themselves do not think they are obscure. These congregations have taught and continue to teach me more about God, the presence of the Risen Christ, the clear evidences of the work of the Holy Spirit, than I could ever hope to teach them.
- From them I have learned and continue to learn life lessons about sharing, humility, prayer, spiritual warfare and the existence of real evil, the importance of learning to wait, empathy, appreciation, thankfulness, compassion, God's provision, wonder and awe, trusting in him, grace, mercy, joy and hope.

Question: Would I have learned?

Do WE learn such things without the Wadi Cherith times and experiences of our lives?

Maybe, but not I believe with the memorable forcefulness AND conviction associated with the Wadi Cherith times in our lives!!

Elijah is sent first to the Wadi Cherith to drink from the water and to be fed by the ravens. The time of waiting, of preparation is not over It continues as he meets the widow and her son in Zarephath – another story for another time.

Elijah did not know fully what lay head and neither do any of us.

The assurance we share with Elijah is *the assurance God's people have always in good and in anything but sterling happy days are here again times – GOD IS HERE*

*AND HE IS NEITHER SILENT
NOR DISENGAGED!!!*

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