

Nourishment for our Transformation Journey
August 9, 2015

Cathedral of the Incarnation

The French philosopher and Christian apologist Blaise Pascal once said that the face of the world would have been changed if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter. In some ways the course of ancient Israel was profoundly shaped by the characteristics of another woman. Her name was Jezebel.

Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab of the northern kingdom of Israel, was a follower and priestess of the ancient faith of Baal. The biblical story of King Ahab, the worst king in the long line of ancient kings from the 9th C BCE, and his wife Jezebel, is an important one because we come to understand the lengths people will go to create and protect idols. Violence and bloodshed meant nothing to this power couple of ancient Israel.

Neither Ahab nor Jezebel is mentioned in today's reading from 1 Kings, but they are the reason why Elijah fled to the wilderness. Elijah was a zealous prophet and was incensed by the actions of these two and spoke out forcefully against them. He was a prophet that stood outside of the prevailing power structures of his day, rather than advocating for change from within.

Elijah told the Israelites to stop vacillating and to choose either God or Baal. In a showdown on Mount Carmel, after the people made their commitment to God, Elijah takes the lives of all of the prophets of Baal. When Jezebel finds out about this she is incensed and threatens Elijah with the same fate.

Elijah's escape to the wilderness is a result of his exasperation with the power of Ahab and Jezebel over the northern kingdom. So exasperated he wants to die. Elijah was overcome with doubt and fear. Where was God in the midst of all this violence and bloodshed? Why are these people still in control, we might hear him exclaim. We might be asking the same questions when we think of Syria and Zimbabwe. Where is God when so many suffer?

In the darkness of the spiritual crisis enveloping Elijah, God's presence is made known to him through the touch of an angel. It is a tender moment in the midst of so much violence, fear and doubt. God provides the comfort and nourishment for Elijah in this critical moment of his life. For Elijah that food fed him for his long journey to Mt Horeb, to a meeting with God, much like Moses did all those years before.

The verses that follow our reading today tell us of Elijah's encounter with God on Mt Horeb. God did not appear in the violence of wind, fire and earthquake, rather God appeared to Elijah in the silence of the night. God comes to us too in the stillness of our lives.

Over the past few weeks I have been reminded of the suffering that accompanies people living with mental illness and addiction. Suffering not only for them but for their families as well. I was reminded that our life is so very unpredictable, no matter how hard we try to

shape it; it can be derailed by illness and misadventure. In the midst of these crises we often doubt that God is close to us, just like Elijah.

In my work as a chaplain I encountered so many people who suffered deeply, not always as a direct result of their illness, but suffered nonetheless in relationship with others. Sometimes these issues were of their own making, sometimes not. But suffering was a common denominator. Guilt, depression, deep sadness and anger seemed to be infused in their suffering, putting these people into what I saw as their living personal hell.

We journey into these hellish places a little bit at a time, often unaware of the deep consequences of our decisions and actions. If we journey into this state of hell, we can also journey out. We can choose to be transformed and work at restoring these relationships, or at least restoring ourselves.

In our reading from Paul's epistle to the Ephesians he is essentially saying to them that they can change, they can be transformed through following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ – talking out our anger, uplifting each other with positive words, being kind, loving and forgiving. The thief can choose to journey back from a life of crime, Paul says, and so we can choose to change our lives. God will feed us on this journey back, and we will find God in the silence.

I will never forget an encounter I had with a patient in November last year, late one night after being called in by his family. Nelson was a man of my age who had advanced leukemia and he was largely out of treatment options. He was a very quiet man and told me that he wasn't hopeful of making it to Christmas.

In the quietness of his isolation room he slowly opened up to me about his life. He expressed that he had doubt about his new found faith in God. His ex-wife, his daughter and friends had been encouraging him to believe harder as a way of overcoming his doubt but he couldn't, and he was suffering because of it. He asked me how he could be made right with God, and how to keep the commandments. He said that his dad had left him alone as a child and had gone out and done drugs. He felt like this experience resulted in his life lived with little responsibility.

He told me he needed to forgive his dad for abandoning him, and also for something told to his mother that caused deep anger and hurt. After telling me this and confiding that it was tough to speak about, he said he was tired and wanted to stop. I offered to pray for him, which I did asking God to give him the strength and courage to reach out to his Dad. As soon as I finished he took his phone and made a call. He called his dad and told him that he forgave him.

God spoke to Nelson in the stillness of his room that night as we were in prayer. He needed reconciliation with his father and so he reached for it despite his physical and spiritual weakness. He made the choice to journey out of his own "hell." It was a grace filled moment, and for me a moment of resurrection.

I wasn't able to speak with him again in depth because of his weakness. I did see him a couple of more times, but then as so often happened he was discharged. In late January I had a phone call from his ex-wife. She wanted to tell me that Nelson had died and that our conversation that still night had meant so much to him. She said that he was very much at peace when he died, which for me was a heaven moment. Dying in full love and reconciliation with ourselves, our family and God is the sweet unity I imagine heaven to be.

This life we live is lived as a journey of transformation, especially if we hold our faith to be true, even with the doubt that shadows faith. Each Sunday as we wake we make a decision to come to church, rather than to head to Seventh St for brunch. It means something to be here, to be together, to share in the Eucharistic meal. It means something to be nourished.

John tells us that Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." This bread though isn't the slices of toasted sourdough that I love to eat at brunch. It is the spiritual nourishment we receive through communion with God and with each other that is the sustenance for the journey of life. Jesus says the bread is his flesh, his very humanness, filled with love and the knowledge of God.

Elijah didn't have the benefit of knowing Jesus but he did have within him the knowledge of God. We have the benefit of knowing Jesus but we can still have Elijah's experience. Totally exasperated by life, full of doubt and fearful of the consequences of someone's violent actions, we wonder what to do.

We may not flee to a mountain but we might flee into our anger, or further into our doubt about God's existence. Elijah's experience of meeting God in the stillness of life, between the difficulties, can be our experience too. It is in these times, when we create the space, we might feel the soft caress of the Holy Spirit crossing our hearts.

Each Sunday we share in this sacred time together and in this holy meal that is given for us as a constant reminder of Jesus love for us. It is an invitation to be transformed in love.

This is the good news of Jesus Christ. This is the nourishing meal that binds us to Christ through the communion we have with each other. This is the nourishment for the journey of life. This is resurrection, the antidote to death. Death no longer has a sting.

Elijah ran from fear but was transformed by his encounter with God and strengthened for his journey closer to the heart of God. We too can be transformed each day to love, forgive and change the world.

Amen