

## 6-14-2020 SERMON CCI I Kings 17: 1-8 Lessons by the Brook

I've been in prayer about our way forward as a congregation during the turbulent time we face, not only because of the challenges of Covid-19 restrictions and health risks, the social unrest in our nation, but also because of the decisions we are facing about the future of this congregation. I was drawn to the stories of the prophet Elijah who lived in an equally turbulent time. Elijah had to learn along the way how to walk by faith when he could not see the path ahead. He experienced emotional highs and emotional lows. Many of us can relate to those feeling. So, we will be exploring Elijah's story for the next 5 weeks, seeking insight for living and the decisions ahead.

Elijah is one of Israel's most revered prophets. He spoke truth to power, he performed miracles, he mentored upcoming leaders, and he turned people to God. Elijah didn't even die a physical death but was transported up to heaven by the Spirit. Malachi prophesied Elijah would return to prepare the way for the Messiah, and Jesus said that John the Baptist came in the spirit of Elijah. Moses and Elijah even came to encourage Jesus on the mount of transfiguration. It's clear that Elijah was a striking, powerful man of God.

But Elijah didn't begin that way. Verse 1 tells us Elijah was from the small village of Tishbe, so small it was never on a map, and is gone. Tishbe was in the hill country of Gilead, nowhere special. Elijah was a nobody. Uneducated, not rich or cultured. He was rather ordinary. In fact, the book of James tells us that Elijah was just a human being, even as we are<sup>1</sup>. He's like us, and we can learn from him about real faith for real people.

God called Elijah out of his obscurity to the palace of powerful King Ahab. What do we know about King Ahab? A few verses earlier, he was described this way: "Ahab, son of Omri, did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of the kings before him." Not a strong endorsement! Sounds like some of the TV ads for Trump and Biden with nothing good to say. Trump is incompetent! Biden is a socialist! But there was a reason for God's poor endorsement. Ahab had married Jezebel, the daughter of the Gentile king of Sidon. Ahab encouraged the worship of Jezebel's god, Baal, the god many thought controlled the rain. Under King Ahab's leadership, the people of God worshiped and prayed to the Lord **and** to Baal just in case God didn't come through. The Lord noticed and sent Elijah.

I want you to imagine the scene in the palace. First picture powerful King Ahab, dressed in his royal robes, seated on his throne surrounded by his armed guards. Everything reeked of wealth and power. Then Elijah the nobody enters. He had one message- "By the power of the Lord, God of Israel, there will be no rain or even dew in the land for the next few years until I say so." He delivered his life-threatening pronouncement, and left.

God sent Elijah east to hide by a small brook where God would provide for him as the drought began to ravage the land and King Ahab began to get angry. Ravens would bring him meat and bread twice a day and he could drink the clean fresh water of the brook. He would be safe from King Ahab and well cared for.

Ravens were an interesting bird for God to choose as his catering service. The Old Testament law forbid eating ravens along with all scavenger birds. Any practicing Jew would

---

<sup>1</sup> James 5: 17.

not have even come near a raven, yet God used ravens to meet Elijah's need. Did Elijah balk when the ravens came? "Lord, I can't eat food from something so unclean!" What kind of meat did the ravens bring Elijah- 3 day old road kill? Yuck! Twice a day those forbidden birds brought Elijah's food and he drank from the brook and waited. Day after day, sitting in the shade beside that babbling brook, he had no fear, no troubles, maybe a bit lonely perhaps, but it was quite peaceful. It reminds me of Psalm 23, there he was, sitting beside still waters, with God spreading a table before him in spite of his enemies.

One morning Elijah noticed that the brook wasn't bubbling as much as it had been. Over the next few days he watched it slowly dwindle and shrink, until it was only a trickle, harder to get a drink. Then one morning, there was no water, only wet sand. That soon dried up and the sand hardened. No more water. The brook had dried up. Now Elijah faced the same question everyone else faced- who did he trust... the LORD or Baal?

Haven't we all faced dry brooks in our lives? Those times when life turns upside down and our faith is tested? Perhaps it's after a medical diagnosis or an injury that threatens our life or the life of someone we love, the end of a relationship we hoped would last forever, or the unexpected loss of a job. Or our friends are all gone. Or money is really tight. Many people are experiencing tight finances during this pandemic, even wondering where their next meal will come from, how to pay the rent or the mortgage. Food banks are busy places. Sitting beside a brook as it keeps getting drier is scary, we can wonder where God is. There are lessons we can learn sitting beside a dry brook.

1) Beside a dry brook we can learn that impossible situations are possible in God's hands. Who would have thought that ravens would bring food to a hungry human rather than eating it themselves or hoarding it in their nest? Beside a dry brook we learn that the brook may run out of water, but God never runs out of supplies. Baptist Pastor R. G. Lee said, "We never test the resources of God until we attempt the impossible." Where did he learn that? Growing up in a sharecropper family of faith in South Carolina in the late 1800's- early 1900's, working the land, never knowing whether there would be enough money for seed for next year or enough rain for this year, learning to trust God in advance because they had seen God do the impossible over and over.

2) A dry brook can teach us to be content with what God provides. In the Lord's Prayer we ask God to give us this day our daily bread. We don't ask for our weekly bread or our monthly bread; we ask for our daily bread. Yet how easy it is to want more, or want something else. Don't you think Elijah got tired of eating road kill and broken off pieces of dried bread the ravens scavenged for him? Surely he wished for something different to drink than water sometimes. I'd be longing for my ice cold Diet Coke after one day! But time beside a dry brook can teach us to be content with what we have, and let it be enough.

3) Beside a dry brook we can really learn that God is faithful, but not always in the way we think or hope. I doubt Elijah expected his personal brook to dry up. I imagine he expected the Lord to continue providing the meat, bread, and water the very same way he had done before. Expected God to keep things peaceful and safe. Don't we expect that too? God provides a mate for us to share life with; surely God won't allow our mate to die or to leave. God provides beautiful children to bless our lives; surely none of our children will die before

us. Even in the church we're tempted to believe things will stay the same, so we balk at trying new things, resist new ways of being the church that can help us engage the world of today; we want to keep it just the way it's always been. And then comes a belief-clarifying pandemic where the things we've clung to as essential are gone- like the place we worship and the way we worship, how we stay connected. We can't take them for granted anymore. Some things that have changed will not go back to the old normal when a vaccine is ready. I believe God is inviting us to use this dry brook time called COVID-19 to re-discover what's most important, to clarify where God is leading, to re-think what it means to be **Christ's** church, not a church of our design.

Last week, Dorothy Hay said something important. A group of us were discussing the coming church vote about whether to renew the lease on the space where we have gathered and worshiped. What will it mean to not renew the lease? What about calling a new pastor? What is the wise use of God's money? What's our purpose as a church? And Dorothy said we are at a sacred point in the life of the church. Not just a difficult point, like a dry brook we wish would go away - but a sacred point. That rings so true to me because sacred means God is here and we can put our fear aside and follow wherever God leads.

As you prepare to vote this week, what if you treat this vote as a sacred act rather than an act of church business? Praying in trust not fear, and voting by faith in the God who's with you right now? As we sang earlier, "He is here." Beside this dry brook, we have the sacred opportunity to face head-on the question of who we trust more- ourselves or God? Our dreams or God's dreams? Our goals or God's goals?

As we continue exploring Elijah's story, we will see very clearly who Elijah trusted. The question is, who will **we** trust?

BENEDICTION (adapted from blessing by James Dillet Freeman)

**The Light of God surrounds us;**

**The Love of God enfolds us;**

**The Power of God protects us;**

**The Presence of God watches over us.**

**Wherever we are, {even by a dry brook}, God is there!**