



Pentecost 2 – Proper 7 Year C

The Nature of Miracles

[RCL]: 1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a; Psalm 42 and 43; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

Susanna E. Metz

If Ahab and Jezebel were after me, I'd run, too! Elijah was so afraid, he wished he might just die, but God had other plans for him as God often does for us. This is a wonderful story from today's reading from First Kings about one of the great prophets who is so human in his fears, yet a model for us of what we can accomplish if we listen to the voice of God.

First Kings tells the story of how God's people have turned their back on the Lord. How sad – they are missing out on the amazing gift of knowing God's love. For even in their sin, God desires their repentance and return.

But they are noisy people. Previously in First Kings, we've already seen the prophets of Baal dancing and shouting and slashing themselves with their knives in their frenzy to call their impotent gods down on their sacrifice. Elijah showed them a different God – a God who can do miraculous things, but who also can listen to the small voice of his creature.

Isn't it unfortunate that Jezebel, who could have repented and turned to this all-merciful God, instead felt her authority so threatened that she put out a death warrant for Elijah?

Now in his hiding place, Elijah hears God's voice and answers honestly. "I'm afraid – I can do no more."

In today's language, God says, "Hang on, I'm coming. Here's where you'll find me."

Elijah experiences winds that tear rocks loose from mountains and an earthquake – the mighty force of nature's power – but he finds God, finally, in the gentle breeze, in silence. In a similar text from Isaiah, God even calls out to the people, "Here I am, here I am!" They do not hear the pleading voice. And yet, God does not destroy them all. Yes, there will be punishment, but there will also be redemption and much more to show the limitless abundance of God's mercy.

So often we experience a sense of desperate need in our hearts, but we forget where we can turn. There is a beautifully plaintive song sung by the character Katisha in Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta "The Mikado." She has been jilted by the man she loves, and sings: "Oh, living I! Come, tell me why, when hope is gone, dost thou stay on? Why linger here, where all is drear?"

It's one of the most beautiful songs written by Gilbert and Sullivan – both text and melody tear at the listener's heart. We might imagine God's heart being as torn by the frenzied noise and deliberate ignorance of God's own

people who choose evil over love, today as well as several centuries ago. If God were human, God just might have said, “Why do I stay here where all is drear and when hope is gone?”

Thankfully though, even as we try to put God in our small boxes, God is eternal and beyond our sad manipulations. Instead, God continues to call, “Here I am, here I am!”

When will we answer?

In our gospel reading, Jesus might have been feeling that same emotion when he healed a sick man and yet the people begged him to leave them alone. In his book “Miracles,” C. S. Lewis writes: “Miracles do not, in fact, break the laws of nature.”

“Oh, really?” the Gerasenes in today’s gospel reading would probably ask. “How about the one where Jesus sends the demons into our flock of pigs and they run off the cliff to drown in the sea?”

It sounds like the start of a lame joke, but it was no joke to the swineherds who made their livelihood from the pigs. So, what do we do about this? What was Jesus thinking when he gave the demons what they wanted?

St. Augustine, on the other hand has said, “Miracles are not contrary to nature, but only contrary to what we know about nature.”

Well, that’s a little better. Maybe we don’t know everything about pigs after all. Maybe the thought of living with something evil inside was too much for the pigs, who, after all, are very sensitive animals. But that, too, flies in the face of our perception of Jesus as caring about all people, gentile swineherds included.

So, which is right? Do we try to figure out why Jesus sent Legion into a herd of pigs? Do we just rejoice that a man, and a gentile at that, was healed? Do we castigate the Geresenes for sort of being like the false prophets in First Kings, who said, in effect, “Get out of here, you’re more trouble than you’re worth!”

One way to look at it is to realize that the pigs are not the point. Jesus’ authority over demons is the point. Jesus caring about people with terrible difficulties is the point. And probably Jesus extending his ministry to gentiles is a point. The pigs – maybe it wasn’t like that at all. We truly just don’t know.

What was Luke’s focus at this point in his gospel? What did he want to get across about Jesus to his own hearers? That’s something we have to struggle with when we read the gospels. They were all written for another century’s hearers, and we have to consider that when we read them now. We need to look for the underlying message and not worry about whether Jesus sent something calling itself Legion into a herd of pigs. It may not have happened exactly like that.

Jesus truly cared for the poor and hurt of the world. Jesus was showing that God’s love included outsiders, like the gentiles. Jesus showed that God’s power was mightier than the power of evil – just like Elijah had done many centuries before. C. S. Lewis reminds us that we can’t understand everything about miracles.

There are some things we have to give over to faith and the presence of mystery in our human lives, and that’s OK. We should allow awe and wonder to fill our souls and direct our gaze toward the Almighty, who thankfully, loves us with an unconquerable love.

So, what do we do?

Maybe we should look for a place that is our sacred place, a place where we can listen for God’s voice in the silence and in the gentle breeze. The voice will be there. We can imitate Jesus and open our eyes and hearts to the needs of those who are right there beside us – those we don’t see even as we step around them. And we can pray that we will

live out the pronouncement of Paul: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

All of us are one!

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