

Limping Between Stories
I Kings 18.20-21, 30-39; Galatians 1.1-12
Pentecost +2
May 29, 2016
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

My family has begun talking about our July beach trip almost daily, we're spending the weekend filing away the 2015-2016 school year and inventorying our swim goggles and flip flops. Today we will make our annual "Summer List" of every big and small thing we want to do together over the next twelve weeks. The energy is shifting, the pace is shifting, and the parents' work routines are shifting. It's a different time now.

In the liturgical calendar, we also mark the time differently over the next six months. Karoline Lewis calls it "the long green season,"¹ these Sundays between Trinity last week and Christ the King in November. All of the weeks between late May and late November are considered to be in the season of Pentecost—the Spirit still everywhere and in everything—but also called Ordinary Time. The time is shifting even here.

This is the time for "the living of these days,"² and in the ordinary living of our days, we are prone to forget—to forget to look up and notice beauty and goodness, to forget to say "thank you" for the beauty and goodness we have seen, to forget the source of that beauty and goodness altogether. In the ordinary living of our days, we sometimes forget what Walker Percy calls "the search."

"The search," writes Percy, "is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair."

How much time do we squander being sunk in the everydayness of our own lives? We forget that the Ordinary is still rich with the Spirit of God everywhere and in everything. We are lost to the notion of possibility. We move through our days with inertia and routine. We forget to notice. We forget who we are. We forget to say "thank you." We forget.

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=4659>

² Hymn "God of Grace, God of Glory"

And yet in our forgetfulness, we are not alone. We have before us this morning two stories of forgetting. In I Kings it is the story of an entire nation who has forgotten that there is only one true God, and they've half-heartedly gone wandering after the gods of the rulers around them. Elijah is the only prophet of God left in Israel; and there are 450 prophets of Baal. How could his story be heard against the din of such popularity and cultural dominance? He challenges Yahweh and Baal to a contest to prove who is God. Each deity is named separately with the title "God" being open to the winner. Elijah has not forgotten. Elijah is still in the search and believes he can remember for everyone who is sunk. Elijah knows that only one path carries power and truth with it, and most likely that path is not the one being touted by the people in power that keeps its citizenry compliant.

The prophets of Baal build an altar, prepare Elijah's ox for sacrifice, and wait for their god to move. "But nothing happened—not so much as a whisper of breeze."³ The prophets and followers of Baal are distraught, and Elijah is no help as he taunts them suggesting their god is asleep or has gone off for a little while. After half a day of no response, Elijah speaks, and the people listen.

He begins to instruct them, and they follow his instructions. The altar for God has been ruined by the prophets of Baal, so Elijah rebuilds it. He takes twelve stones and reminds the people of the story of Jacob and the name Israel—the first one limping from his struggle with God. He builds an altar to the one true God and tells the story as he digs a wide trench around the altar, lays firewood over it, and prepares a second ox for sacrifice. He instructs the people to fill four buckets with water and drench both the ox and the firewood. Do it again (8 buckets). Do it again (12 buckets). The people fill and refill and pour as Elijah speaks. He repairs what has been destroyed. He tells the story and enacts a ritual of remembering. He re-names the people around him who are watching the prophets' contest but have forgotten who they are.

Then Elijah calls out to God:

"O God, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, make it known right now that you are God in Israel...answer me and reveal to this people that you are God, the true God, and that you are giving these people another chance at repentance."

Immediately the fire of God fell and burned up the offering, the wood, the stones, the dirt, and even the water in the trench. All the people saw it happen and fell on

³ I Kings 18.26, *The Message*

their faces in awed worship, exclaiming, "God is the true God! God is the true God!"

Israel forgets and looks to others for their path, but God again (not for the first time and not for the last) makes a way for them to return to the path. The same happens to the Galatians. Paul writes to them as he did to so many other churches, but this time he sends no words of gratitude and cuts to the chase. "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel," he writes.

In Paul's absence, the Galatians have met a new wandering pastor who tells them they can't really be loved by God and on the way to God unless they adhere to strict rules and strict body codes. Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians are at odds at this point in the church's early story, and the Galatians fear they will miss out on the love of God. In their fear, they adopt the stricter codes with more rules and heavier physical requirements.

Sometimes there's a comfort in being told to follow a set list of rules that one can tick off as one accomplishes each. God will love me if I avoid these people. God will love me if I read this book. God will love me if I pray this way. God will love me if I name other people's sin and call it dirty. God will love me if I follow *this* teacher instead of *that* teacher. God will love me if I fall in line with these leaders even if I secretly disagree with their narrow definition of truth. When we chase after love from a place of fear, the simplicity of legalism is quite tempting.

Both stories of forgetting are rooted in anxiety as Israel shifts her loyalty to the gods of the dominant cultures around her and as the Galatians cling to unnecessary rules to please the God they love. Both groups of people are anxiously searching for protection, certainty, provision and love while their spiritual guides repeat with boldness and confidence: hold to what you already know is right. Believe in the simple path. Honor the God who loves you by giving your life to the search of that God. Stop limping between stories in fear and fatigue.

And so, as we find ourselves in the long green season, the ordinary, everyday time, we must ask ourselves: In what way now are we limping between guiding stories? In what ways are we hiding from our truth? Hoping for the Joneses down the street to approve of us or the right political candidate to protect us or the illusive hunt for perfection to be the story that changes our life? God offers, again (not for the first time and not for the last time) a way for us to return to the path.

The prophet Elijah, the last one of Israel, repairs the altar and replaces the stones as he retells Israel's story. We talk about prophecy like it is a predictive horoscope or a good shake of the 8 ball, but biblical prophecy is really about pointing back to the guiding story of who God's people are in relation to God. As he stacks each stone, he names the tribes. With each pour of the bucket, he re-members Israel. And then, he invokes God's power and presence with an invitation for every witnessing child of God to repent.

That is the work we are doing each time we gather here. We read the stories again. We light the candles again. We pray the prayers again and sing the songs again and hold the silence again because we know we limp between opinions and paths and memories. We know we have been de-formed by our culture and our families and our fears and our misguided longings. To repent simply means we open our eyes and see where we are and see where the path is, and we take the next steps to put our bodies back on it.

To return to the path we must remember from the beginning of Genesis through the writings of Paul that we humans are invited to be coworkers and co-creators with God. Here Elijah shows us what that work looks like. When we are wandering aimlessly, limping between the true Way and the ways that entice us, the work of the prophet is to remind us all of our best story. And sometimes that means repairing, restoring, replacing, rebuilding what we have mucked up and destroyed. The work of the prophet is to call on the past to guide us in the everydayness of our lives with open eyes. And then, when we wake up to our lives, we whisper, "Ah, the Lord indeed is God, the Lord indeed is God."

Amen.