

*Beyond Caves and Graves*  
Fourth Sunday After Pentecost  
June 20, 2010  
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Texts:      1 Kings 19.1-15a;  
                 Psalm 42;  
                 Galatians 3.23-2;  
                 Luke 8.26-39

Imagine a primitive world where the people worship idols that they believe have the power to provide rain, to promote fertility, and assure prosperity. That's the world we enter in 1 Kings today. It may seem quite removed from where we live - but stay with me for a moment and see if you can find your way into this story today.

In arid climates, the power to make rain was the power to control the resources of wealth and prosperity. If you could control the rain – you could control the world. Ahab was the king of Israel and he saw in the worship of Baal – this foreign god of fertility and rain –the opportunity to leverage the power he needed to control the resources of his kingdom.<sup>1</sup> If you set aside for the moment the means by which the worshippers of Baal were doing this (trying to control the rain through rituals of fertility), what they were trying to do sounds eerily familiar. They were seeking to manipulate the resources of nature to create wealth for themselves while creating a scarcity of those same resources for the rest of the world. Elijah rises up as the prophet who is willing to stand toe to toe against this powerful king and this growing world view that disregarded the teaching of Torah: which is that God created a world of abundant resources – if we live in right relationship with God, in harmony with that creation, and at peace with our neighbor, there is enough for everyone.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This section on the context of Baal worship was informed by the following source: Brueggemann, Walter. *First and Second Kings, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2000), 209.

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann makes this kind of observation between the worship of Baal and contemporary economic realities verses the theology of abundance present in creation narratives, 229.

Wherever there are profits to be made and power to behold, the teachings of Torah fall on deaf ears. They sound naïve, simplistic, and utterly unrealistic. Trying to get the attention of the powers that be, whether that's the king of ancient Israel or the corporate executives of big oil, you are in for a long and at times dangerous fight. Whistle blowers will tell a similar story of how their exposure of this kind of greed and manipulation put them on the run. Hopefully their lives aren't in danger but certainly their livelihood is. You don't have to be a prophet or whistle blower to understand that place where Elijah finds himself in our text today. If you've ever given every ounce of your very best energy, or harnessed all of your creativity and skill to tackle some problem only to discover that your effort isn't going to make the difference you thought that it would, you know that sinking feeling of despair that came over Elijah.

The problem for Elijah is that he has become overly impressed by his zeal for God and his place in this work. God never tells Elijah to set up this dramatic show down with the prophets of Baal. That was Elijah. He's the one who orchestrated that scene. He's the one who decides to kill all the prophets of Baal. He gets swept up in his sense of injustice and his conviction that he can singlehandedly make things right. Then when it all implodes and Queen Jezebel is after his life, he becomes completely distraught and depressed and loses, quite frankly, his sense of perspective. Elijah is not the only prophet of God that is left. He is not the only one who has been working to make things right again in Israel. But when you've thrown yourself into something and given it your all and then feel that you are under attack and unappreciated I suppose these delusions of grandeur are par for the course. No one has invested as much, no has suffered as much, and no one can possibly understand...the trouble I've seen (you remember that old spiritual?)

While Elijah is on the run, God invites him to be restored and renewed. This is what God does. We see it again and again throughout the stories of scripture. We see it alive in our own experience; the way that people come along when we find ourselves at the end - whether that is at the end of our hope or the end of our strength. Someone comes along and touches us (I love that detail in the story - when the angel touches Elijah to invite him to get up and eat). Someone comes along and gives us just enough to take the

next step. This is not the end for Elijah. He needs to keep running before he can come to the place at that cave where he is ready to see what his place really is in this work of God.

It is here that we come to that familiar part of the passage. God is revealed to him not in some dramatic display of power - the kind that Elijah has become rather fond of. The voice of God comes after the sound of sheer silence. There is something about silence that can provide a stopping point. Silence can begin to crack into that solid rock of certainty and offer the possibility of some new way of seeing. It certainly wasn't an immediate awareness for Elijah. He runs through his "I'm the only one" song and dance one more time.

But God does get him to move beyond the cave and beyond his fear in order to go back home and realize that the fate of the world was not resting solely on Elijah's shoulders. If you read beyond our text today you discover there were some 7,000 faithful left in Israel and that there were three generations of leaders who would continue this work where Elijah left off. In order for Elijah to move beyond the cave at Mt. Horeb God needed to help Elijah reorient his sense of place within his community. He needed to go back home with a renewed sense of just how wide God's reach extends - beyond what he could see. He needed to give up those delusions of grandeur and to draw courage from the truth that his work is just one part of this complex web of influence that would work God's ways, over time, back into the center again of Israel's life.

When we come to the gospel, we discover that moving the demoniac beyond the graves of the Garesenes would require a reorientation of a very different kind. There is so much going on in this passage from Luke today. It's location in Gentile territory foreshadows for the gospel of Luke what Paul says here in Galatians so directly: "as many of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Galatians 3.27-28

You may remember hearing about James Alison when the group in town called Holland is Ready invited him to be the speaker at their first public event in our community. Those of you who were blessed to hear him speak know that he embodies such a gentle, yet clear and strong sense of his place in the body of Christ and in the community of faith. He is both a Jesuit priest and an out gay man who remains within the catholic church that he loves. In his book *Faith Beyond Resentment*, he describes the most compelling explanation of what Jesus does in this passage for this man that I've ever read. This man's healing comes as Jesus helps him reorient his sense of place within this community. Alison argues that the reason the Gerasene people become frightened and angry to find this man sitting, fully clothed and in his right mind is because their sense of cohesion as a community hinges on his role as the crazy and dangerous outcast. They know themselves to be in their right minds because they can point to this one who is NOT.<sup>4</sup> It's the way that scapegoats function in our societies (as Renee Girard talks about it). We feel connected to one another when we can identify the enemies among us. The logic of the Gerasene society – if we are honest, the logic of most of our human societies – is that “it is better that one man be cast out than a whole nation should be disrupted.”<sup>5</sup> James Alison argues that the logic of Jesus is “‘it is good that one man should be made human and that the whole nation should learn to live differently’, the logic which prefers the one lost sheep to the ninety-nine which never strayed.”<sup>6</sup>

The reason Alison sees the dynamics of this text so clearly is because it describes his experience of being a gay man in a homophobic church (and I don't mean here the Roman Catholic Church – I mean THE Church). He had to annihilate the part of himself that the community deemed dangerous, sinful, and perverse and he sees in this story from Luke a metaphor and picture of what happens when you do that. (I don't mean to suggest that the Garesene demoniac is gay, I only mean to share how the dynamics within his community illumine other experiences of social rejection.) Alison describes what happens when you have to annihilate a

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<sup>4</sup> James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: fragments catholic and gay* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 126.

<sup>5</sup> Alison, 128.

<sup>6</sup> Alison, 128.

part of your being that others deem dangerous in order to belong: that part of your being wanders in the “outer places... quite out of control, utterly dehumanized, reduced to a vagrant spirit acting out its role of evil which it has been given by the group.”<sup>7</sup>

What Jesus does in this text is walk right up to this tortured and broken soul and speaks without fear and without condemnation to the very part of him his community has rejected. He invites this one who has been relegated to wander among the graves to see himself the way that God sees him: as human and whole and deeply loved. Alison describes the logic of the gospel that Jesus presents in this text as the way that God “rejoices in nothing so much as someone made human, sitting, clothed, and in their right mind, at home, among friends, sharing the story of how they came to be in this strange place.”<sup>8</sup> It’s because Alison has felt that profound reorienting of his place in God’s family that he can speak with such gentle serenity.

Those who had the opportunity to hear James Alison speak all said the same thing about him. Regardless of whether you agreed with him or not, it was his gentle and remarkably loving demeanor that stood out. He has a razor sharp mind and a quick wit and is unafraid to speak the truth as he sees it but he does so with such love. He envisions our work of making things right in the world not as calling down fire on the perceived enemies of God. But instead it is the work of cultivating a sense of longing for other people to discover the joy and the freedom that comes when you understand that before God there is no longer slave or free, Jew or Greek, male and female, or any other category by which human beings seek to limit the grace and freedom of God.

I don’t know what your sense of place is today. I don’t know whether you see yourself in the caves of Mt. Horeb or the graves of the Garesenes. But the good news is this: God seeks to restore you to your proper place.

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<sup>7</sup> Alison, 128-129.

<sup>8</sup> Alison, 131

For some of us it is restoring our sense of how small our part is in the vast scheme of God's work in the world; a reminder that the weight of the world is not on our shoulders.

For others of us it is restoring our sense of just how important our place is in the community of God's people. We belong and we have stories to tell that the community needs to hear.

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

You belong.

Find your place.

And live in peace.