

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

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Rev. John F. Koerner

First Presbyterian Church

Clarksburg, WV

1 Kings 19:9-16

Acts 1:1-11

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth . . . (Jeremiah 31:8 N.R.S.V.)

Now What?

I recently read a book by Dr. Eric Law entitled, “Finding Intimacy in a World of Fear.” Dr. Law helped bring our Old Testament Lesson to life for me.

Part of the story you just heard read, but let’s review back a bit further. Things were bad in Israel, really, really bad. Elijah was the only prophet of God left in the land, while the prophets of Baal numbered 450. Elijah then challenged the prophets of Baal to gather with him on Mt. Carmel and settle this whole “who is the one true God” thing once and for all.

Elijah set the conditions of the test. The prophets of Baal were to prepare a sacrifice to their god but put no fire to it. Elijah was to do the same. Then both parties were to pray to their god to send down fire from heaven and burn up the sacrifice. The one who was answered with fire would be the winner.

The 450 prophets of Baal went first. They danced and sang and screamed around their altar. They cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood flowed. They kept it up for most of the day until they all fell exhausted to the ground. No fire from heaven fell on their altar.

Then Elijah prepared an altar to God. He put the wood and sacrifice on the altar, he dug a trench around the altar and then he poured water over everything so that it pooled in the trench. Then Elijah prayed a simple prayer asking for God to send fire. Fire did indeed fall from heaven. It burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the water, the very stones of the altar and even the dust. It was all gone.

In the face of this great miracle Elijah stirred up the crowd and they killed all the prophets of Baal. It was a great victory!

Next Elijah told King Ahab that the predicted three years of drought was about to end. He told the King to harness his horses to the chariot and be on his way before the rain stopped him. The king was doubtful because there wasn't a cloud in sight. Nevertheless he got in his chariot and started off for the Jezreel. Some time passed while Elijah was in prayer. Then a cloud the size of a man's had finally appeared in the distance. Finally, the sky filled with clouds and rains beat down across the land.

Then Elijah, that mighty champion of God, grabbed his jogging shorts, put on his Nike tennis shoes and out raced the king's chariot to the Jezreel.

So then everyone believed in God and they all lived happily ever after. No, wait, that isn't it at all.

The common people, after all of these great miracles, did not turn to God. They seemed to have forgotten all about it the next day. The evil Queen Jezebel, however, did not forget. She was wrath. She was twisted, furious, wild, angry, wrathful, incensed.

Jezebel called out the Nation Guard. She said mobilize the Apache Attack Helicopters. Roll out the Abrams tanks. Dispatch the John F. Kennedy aircraft carrier to take station off shore. This Elijah character is the Ace of Spades. I want him exterminated, eliminated, and obliterated, and killed. And I want it yesterday!

That was too much for Elijah. He gave up. He threw in the towel and slunk off into the wilderness to die. God came to Elijah where he was hiding in a cave. God said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" That is a profound question. God is seeking to get Elijah to focus on what God is calling him to do. Elijah doesn't get it.

Elijah says, "God I have been good. You know I have. Yet here I am all alone. And they are out to get me."

Then God tells Elijah to go out and stand before the cave and I will come to you. So Elijah does. There is a great wind, a hurricane if you will. God was not in the wind storm. Next there came an earthquake, a big one, 8.2 on the Richter scale. God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was a fire. It was an echo perhaps of the fire that had devoured the sacrifice and the very stones on Mt. Carmel. God was not in the fire either.

Then there came the sound of sheer silence, or as the King James puts it, a still small voice. It was a quiet voice, one that Elijah had to stop and really listen before he heard anything. God said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" That was the same question as before.

Elijah still doesn't get it. He says, "I have been good and look what it has got me, I am all alone, and they are out to get me."

God says, get back in the game. I am not done and neither are you. Engage with people. Go do prophet things, anoint the people I tell you as king. Anoint a successor to carry on your work. We are in this for the long haul.

Something similar happens in our New Testament lesson from Acts 1. Jesus has come back from the dead. He talks to his disciples, tells them to continue his work, and promises the help of his Holy Spirit. Then he ascends into heaven.

The disciples are stuck. They stand there gazing into heaven as if this is the end. An angel appears to them and asks, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” It is basically the same question that God asks Elijah. “What are you doing here?”

The angel tells the disciples to be about their Lord’s business. This is not the end. It is merely the beginning. We are in it for the long haul.

From time to time we all get discouraged in our ministry. We get stuck. It is hard to tell when you are making progress in ministry. I am not just talking about pastors here, all of us are in ministry together. So sometimes we get stuck.

Sometimes we get stuck gazing into heaven, or back at the good old days. Sometimes we get stuck because we are looking for something flashy: wind, fire, storm, earthquake sort of stuff. Something that will convince people once and for all.

Sometimes we do experience big miracles. Still we do well to remember that God usually works quietly and steadily. He is changing things and people one day at a time.

Edna, right now we are celebrating a victory for you. We are celebrating your hard work and your graduation from high school. Today you have your family and friends around you. It is right for you to celebrate and enjoy this day.

I would like to be able to tell you that all the hard times are now behind you. I would like to, but that would not be true. There will be times in your life when you have done the right thing, you have been faithful, and your world still seems to be falling apart.

You may feel very much alone. You may even feel like God has deserted you. It may feel like that, but the truth is that God will still be with you. You can depend on it!

We all have times when we feel like giving up. When that happens, listen closely for the voice of God. “What are you doing here, Edna?” “Don’t give up. I am not done yet, and neither are you. Join me, the best is yet to come.”

Amen.

