

Sermon for Proper 7

RCL Lectionary, Year C

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

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

What Are You Doing Here?

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

What rich and remarkable readings we have today! We open with this vivid tale of Elijah – a story that we might know almost as well as our spiritual ancestors did. Elijah, in an action-packed moment worthy of the best cinematic special effects and an IMAX production, has just routed the prophets of Baal, showing the wayward King Ahab and his scheming wife, Jezebel, just who God. . . just who the Lord of Israel really is. His subsequent journey through the wilderness to Mount Horeb echoes the journey of the Israelites in the Exodus and presages Jesus' own journey after his baptism. Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles, writes to the Christians of Galatia, in some of the most uplifting language of the epistles – a vision of how the Gospel is radically altering the landscape of our lives across the ages and ushering in a new life where every old definition of who we are is overturned, supplanted, and re-forged. Jesus leads his disciples to the land of the Gerasenes and confronts a horde of demons in a moment that rivals the heroic memories of Elijah – another story of God's raw power to remake and restore, complete with storming herds of swine, awestruck and confused folk, and a crazy man restored to sanity. What a way to move deeper into "Ordinary Time" as our church calendar sometimes calls this long green season after Pentecost. But it is far from ordinary. For we do not live in ordinary times. Neither did Elijah, nor Paul, nor the Galatians, nor certainly Jesus. And there is nothing ordinary when God enters our lives. All becomes extraordinary, as it is touched by the holy finger of the divine, and the Word of God moves among us with unpredictable grace and unforeseen power.

One common thread running deep and implicit through our readings this day is a confrontation with fear. Elijah flees to the wilderness after receiving a death threat from Jezebel. Even though he has utterly defeated the prophets of Baal in an epic battle, Elijah runs for his life and despairs under a broom tree in the wilderness. That's how powerful and fearful he finds Queen Jezebel. Paul writes to the Galatians addressing just about every substantive fear in the book of their lives: fear of law, fear of the Other, the fear that divides Jew from Gentile, slave from free, men from women. Paul is addressing the fear that props up empire and social strictures of his day – the fear that nurses the deep hatreds and divisions, the fearful judgments and the petty legalisms that slice and dice the Body of Christ. Jesus wades into another milieu of fear when he enters the country of the Gerasenes – Gentiles that posed a threat to his ritual purity and that of his disciples. In the country of the Gerasenes, fear is legion. The demoniac is clothed in fear, cast out for his deviant nakedness and bizarre behavior. The demons that Jesus calls out of him are named after a massive cohort of the occupying Roman army: thousands of soldiers comprise a legion. Christ overcomes them by calling forth their name, which they instantly offer up in the face of the Living God. But his casting them into a swineherd rather than back to the fearful depths of Hell not only threatens the local economy but probably encourages wild imaginings of a phalanx of Roman soldiers swarming into town to restore order in the wake of this radically unsettling Prophet, Healer, Teacher, Son of God.

So what does God do when we are afraid? How does our loving God respond when we are like Elijah exhausted under a broom tree desperately afraid of the sun that "burns by day," the light that might show us to our mortal enemies or catch us naked and crazed amongst the tombs?

The beautiful reading from First Kings has God showing up not in the fire that up-staged the prophets of Baal. Nor does God appear in the wind, nor in the great earthquake. God does not address Elijah's fears with a display of power or wrath. In our common parlance, there is no bolt of lightning for the prophet. Rather there is the "sound of sheer silence," or in the older, better known translations of the Hebrew, "a still small voice." And that voice asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" What is Elijah doing wallowing in fear after all he has seen and done? What are the Galatians doing messing about again with divisively narrow application of law when they have been offered the life-giving breadth of the Gospel? Why are the Gerasenes so caught up in their own fears that they cannot see the One who has come among them making the incurable whole again, restoring those who are lost back to life?

"What are you doing here?" This is the question of our loving God in the still, small, gentle voice that meets us in our darkest hours and worst moments, when we are caught up most in our worst fears, when everything we thought we knew is overturned, our strengths are for naught, and our efforts feel most in vain. God refuses to abandon us to leave us in our fear. An angel comes and wakens Elijah to give him strength for the long journey that lies ahead – a journey through the wilderness, and then out of it and back to his vocation as a prophet – a great prophet – amongst the greatest of all the prophets. Paul refuses to abandon the Galatians to their divisive and fearful pursuits and instead lovingly and eloquently leads them back to the courage of the Gospel to unite and transform. Jesus refuses to leave the demoniac possessed and give into the fears of the townspeople who – perhaps quite literally – are content with living with the "devil they know" rather than the potential devil they don't. Healing itself can be terrifying. Mission and transformation for both Elijah and the Galatians is a recipe for fear, especially in the face of daunting odds. But God insists on our moving forward anyway. Elijah must finish his prophetic work. The Galatians must get back to the saving labor of the Gospel. Jesus must move forward with his healing ministry and revelation of God's gracious, transformative love for all peoples.

These days, we all know fear in one form or another. We bathe in it, our airwaves are full of it. The stressors upon so many of us may not be the death threats of Jezebel, but they might as well be – the burden of losing work, of growing older, of bubbles bursting, being faced with an uncertain future, the dissolution of the "way things were," can lead us exhausted to curl up under a broom tree ready to die in our fear. But even if we are tempted towards feeling that our life has become a dead end, our loving God meets us right where we are and then helps us along, calls us forward, demands more of us than we thought possible, and then gives us the grace to follow. . . grace to be led. . . chased even, through the darkness and into the light.

For we are Children of the Living God, a people clothed with Christ. We experience fear, yes, but it no longer is our dwelling. Fear no longer possesses our hearts when we let even the small, still voice of faith into our lives – the voice of a God who calls us out of fear when we are stuck, who follows us into the wilderness, who abides with us in the face of dissolution and death, who sustains us with sacrament and each breath, who helps us see the other with loving eyes, and chases us back to a life of courageous self-offering, self-giving – that we may participate in God's salvation, Christ's re-making of the world.