

JUNE 22, 2019 SERMON by JOHN TSCHUDY

SCRIPTURE LESSON 1 Kings 19:1-15, Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 8:26-39

The story of Elijah is one my favorite Bible stories and represents a good example of what Paul was talking about in last week's lesson. Sometimes doing what God calls us to do may cause us to suffer. Elijah has just defeated and killed the prophets of the gods favored by the rulers of Israel and they have now sent the army to destroy all of the prophets of God and especially Elijah forcing Elijah to run away and hide in a small cave on the holy mountain. While he is hiding there Elijah has this beautiful visit from God. First there is a wind that splits the rock, then an earthquake and finally a great fire, but the presence of God is in none of these powerful forces. Instead after all the turmoil comes in this particular version, "The sound of sheer silence" that Elijah knows is the presence of God. God calls Elijah back to the world and gives him a mission to do. The first lesson we need to understand is God can relate to us in a variety of ways, including silence. In fact sometimes I find that is the best way to relate to God, when we are not distracted by all the confusion of the world and noise we clutter our lives with. The other point coming from this story is Elijah is able to put aside his fear and answer God's call. This is a key example of faithful living.

Paul sees the Old Testament Law as something that imprisoned us and kept us from truly following God's will. Remember Paul was a trained Pharisee, sworn to obey the Law of God as understood by the formal religion without question before his conversion to following Christ. Now he is calling that attitude like being in a prison that forced us into a certain way of living. He says we should be relying on our Faith in God and the Spirit of God to guide us in our way of living, and this sets us free from obeying the letter of the written law. What sets us free is by faith we are restored to the proper relationship with God as God's children. No longer does the law come between us and God. Now we turn to God directly for help struggling with the problems of life. Gone with the law are all of the things that separated us from God and each other. It was the law that divided Jews and Gentiles, when we were both children of God, created by God. It was the law that divided people by their status in life, so there is no longer slave or free but just children of God. It is the law that divides us into male and female creating an inequality that divides us when God sees only God's children. But the reality is people, even the church, prefers rules that are written down leaving no uncertainty in how to understand the law. So in church history we have often jumped over the teachings of Paul and Jesus like our lesson from Galatians in favor of Old Testament Law that Jesus supposedly set us free from and we add to it new criteria to divide people and the church creating different classes of people, even though Paul argues that they shouldn't exist.

In the story of Jesus driving out of the man the "Legion of Demons," We see how our fears can sometimes divide us from our relationship with Jesus and God. It is fear that drives Elijah into the cave. Because the people see the power of Jesus they become afraid and ask him to leave, cutting themselves off from his love and God. As he is leaving Jesus instructs the healed man to go home and begin to proclaim what God has done for him. We live in a time when people try to divide people from one another using fear and the differences that exist between people as the reason for divisions to be made. As the Fourth of July approaches we must as individuals and a country decide which philosophy we will follow and allow to govern us. The Declaration says that we believe God created all people to be equal and gave to us all, certain rights that should not be taken away. Yes many of the signers of that document did not live up to the lofty values it holds. Rather they followed the traditions of their times. But both America and Christianity has often been led by lofty ideals that calls us beyond the traditions of

this world to the hopes of the world that is to come and the Fourth is one of those times to hold those ideals up. In killing the prophets and destroying the altars of the god's favored by the rulers of Israel Elijah took great risks but put the past behind Israel and moved the country and the people into the future relationship that God intended them to have. Paul is calling us into the relationship God intends for us to live in this world, without the divisions created by people. It is this ideal that the founders of our country saw for the country while struggling to have the Faith to actually live by them in their lives. Jesus offers to us the opportunity to rid ourselves of the demons that threaten to possess us and the fears that separate us from God and each other. Each year we face the same question. Will the Fourth of July be just a day of going through the motions of honoring America by putting up as much Red, White and Blue as we can or will we dedicate ourselves to working to the lofty ideals both the nation's founders and our Faith is calling us to?