

*"The Field in Which We Are Planted"*

1 Kings 19:1-15

Elijah. . . What do you think of when that name? If you're of a certain age you probably think Wood, Elijah Wood, the hobbit. Sorry but this is church and while there is much to commend about *The Lord of the Rings* (the book) here it is the prophet. What can you tell me about Elijah? Some of you will probably think of one of the two incidences for which he is perhaps better known.

Some of you might recall the story of his face off with the prophets of Baal. How he challenged them to a duel of prophets, if you will. A bull was slaughtered and made ready for a burnt offering. The idea was that the respective prophets (Baal and Yahweh) would call upon their God to light the sacrificial fire.

(American Pie) The story goes how the prophets of Baal were said have "limped around the altar" and "cut themselves" and "raved on" but there was no answer, no fire. Then Elijah prepared an altar with a sacrificial bull and after putting the wood on the altar he told the people to pour water over the altar not once but three times. And he calls upon the God of Abraham and the "fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering."

The second popular story of Elijah is recounted in today's reading; where Elijah hears the voice of God on the mountain, the still small voice. The account goes like this.

As one can imagine after shaming the prophets of Baal, more than this, after having put them to shame he kills them!! (We won't get into that this morning!) King Ahab goes and tattles to Queen Jezebel who in turns threatens Elijah with his life. She sends the message to him, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I

do not make your life like the life of one of them (Baal's prophets) by this time tomorrow."

So Elijah does the sensible thing and runs for his life, and he keeps running! First he flees Samaria, around modern-day Nablus, for the Negev desert near Beersheba. Then, fueled by a mysterious meal, he continues further south into Egypt, to the mountain of God: Horeb or Sinai. That's a 340-mile run, mostly through the desert, enough to challenge the hardest ultra-marathoner or trail runner today!

And then we have that dramatic and beloved account of God's voice heard, not in the wind, or the earthquake or fire, but in a gentle whisper. And Elijah asks of the Lord "What should I do?" (my paraphrase). And God's answer is something of a geographical punchline to the story so far, *'Return the way you came'*. And in fact, *go further, not just north to Samaria but beyond, to Damascus*.

What would our reaction be to this? For Elijah's to extend his journey north is also an extension of the danger he might have expected to face. If Ahab's Samaria was the frying pan, the Aram of Hadadezer was the fire, Ahab being a subjected-ally of the Great King in Damascus. Entering Hadadezer's territory to anoint someone else to be king, well, let's just say might involve a bit of risk!

Today, "returning the way" we came may not be the mission we're looking for either: the pioneers among us whether in our congregation or the "experts" we read aspire us to reach new frontlines, to discover new ways of seeing and doing, and may sometimes disdain the old and familiar. Which is important to hear for we are confronted with cultural and theological challenges the church has not faced before; challenges that will require us to minister in new and bold ways if

the church is to be all God calls us to be. Still, a retracing of our steps is sometimes in order, a return to what we know best, perhaps with a new vision and a new sense of God's intention for our lives and work.

It wasn't all that long ago when a person talked about becoming a missionary or going to the "mission field" (early in my wrestling with my calling I considered some sort of missionary work), we knew where the mission field was. It was "over there." The other side of the ocean or across the southern border (which for me in Maine meant New Hampshire! So I guess you could say I did become a missionary! 😊)

But that was then. The mission field was "over there" or "down there" maybe "in there" (inner city). Today our culture has shifted so that the mission field begins right outside those doors. It begins when you cross the bridge to our Parish House which it has been suggested it be renamed "Outreach Center." The mission of our congregation is here among the people we see every day, The people sitting around you, the homeless persons and families, hungry children, persons struggling with opioid abuse; those fitting against the odds to stay sober, the mission field is our neighborhoods on our streets Laconia's! The Good news, the message of love and acceptance hasn't changed but the vicinity of our mission has changed. The Church must change. We must change.

In his book *People of the Lie* M. Scott Peck psychologist and author wrote, "It is our task to work the fields we know."

It has been attributed to Saint Francis de Sales the quote: "Bloom where you are planted."

Two weeks ago, we celebrated the day of Pentecost. It was on that day, a Jewish festival 50 days after Passover, when the Spirit fell upon the gathered disciples in Jerusalem. What was the first thing they did after being filled in the spirit and speaking in various languages and Peter's rather lengthy sermon? Acts tells us that *"All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread together at home (from house to house). . ."*

They didn't strike off for the far reaches of the Roman Empire or India or beyond but they began right where they were. They first worked the fields where they were planted. The Spirit lead them to bloom in their homes, their neighborhoods streets and alleys, the places of worship (synagogues) they were already part of. They didn't go out and start the First Church of New believers in Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah! Neither did they run out and join that new church in the suburbs of Jerusalem the "Church of the New Way" everyone was talking about. No, they started living as followers of the Way of Jesus of Nazareth, right in their neighborhood and eventually it was this way of living that others noticed and began to talk about!

Too be sure the message of God's amazing grace and mercy and love did spread throughout known the world of that time. Paul took the leadership of this movement. But it began with Spirit-filled people starting right outside their doors.

Now I'll be honest. This isn't the easiest thing to do! In many ways it is easier to go among strangers and share the gospel. But if you think about it this way, we aren't to go out and preach hell n' damnation but to be witnesses, and when the opportunity arises to give reason for the hope that is within us. As Peter instructed in his first letter "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, . . .*" (1 Peter 3:15)

How do we witness most effectively to our faith in today's culture? Live it, simply live it! And when approached be ready to tell in your own words the reason for your hope, your faith. And it ought to be a bit more than because I'm a member of such and such church. Organized religion is very suspect in today's culture! But Jesus well, Jesus still can speak for himself through our actions!

I leave you with this prayer the *Hebridean Altars* a collection of prayers, blessings and runes from the Scottish island peoples compiled by Alistair Maclean. In the early 1900s

Seven times a day, as I work upon this hungry farm,

I say to Thee, "Lord, why am I here?

What is there here to stir my gifts to growth?

What great thing can I do for others –

I who am captive to this dreary toil?"

And seven times a day Thou answerest, "I cannot do without thee.

Once did My Son live thy life, and by His faithfulness

did show My mind, My kindness, and My truth to [human kind.]

But now He is come to My side, and thou must take his place." Amen!