



“ALL CALL”

SCRIPTURE: 1 KINGS 19:11-16, 19-21; MATTHEW 6:25-34
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, April 14, 2024

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1 Kings 19: 11-16, 19-21

God said to Elijah, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” Then the Lord said to Elijah, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel, and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place...

So Elijah set out from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by Elisha and threw his mantle over him. 20 Elisha left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” Then Elijah said to Elisha, “Go back again, for what have I done to you?” Elisha returned from following Elijah, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah and became his servant.

The Word of the LORD

Thanks be to God

Matthew 6: 25-34

[Jesus said], “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather

into barns, and yet God feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ... your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Of all the call stories we could evoke today, Luke has invited us to consider the Prophet Elisha's. I have preached on this bizarre passage in 1 Kings before, but never at the installation service of a new colleague in ministry who will be serving in the church I, too, am called to serve.

So, I want to get one thing straight before we get too far down the road in our work today exploring the passage in 1 Kings and the passage in Matthew from Jesus' Great Sermon, for all those who believe that we should not talk about politics in church—you're gonna want to see Luke after the service to thank him for this growth opportunity for you!

Today we will be talking about politics—don't worry—we won't really have time to get into the hellscape of our current presidential race in the United States—that's tonight when Chris Highland calls us all to pay attention to the sobering and dangerous precipice on which our democracy sits as White Christian Nationalism gains steam.

So if you are here hoping for a sweet little celebration of the tender little ways God calls us to serve, you can skip talking to Luke after the service, and just go straight to some fervent prayer.

Call is not often a feel good story, but more a harrowing tale tangled up with our limited vision of both God and ourselves.

The story of Elisha's call is tangled up with both overestimations and underestimations of both God and the prophet. After all, Elisha is just a humble farmer minding his own business plowing his fields, right?

Actually, think more sophisticated, high wealth agricultural operation than a small family farm. For Elisha to be driving 12 oxen means this was no small farm, but the ancient version of a lucrative business. Elisha was wealthy and probably an important source of food production for the community, not just for his family.

In other words, we must get out on the table right away, that Elisha had better options for his life's work than risking life and limb to be a prophet in those contentious times. Elisha had a lot to lose.

That's one of the first things we need to remember about call-God provides, but the provisions are not always what we've learned to see as lucrative and secure. Call is not about comfort, it is about trust. And often that trust is tested over and over again, as call is forged and finds its way in the world.

So Elisha not only leaves his lucrative business, he pretty much burns it down on his way out. He destroys the capital that he has by slaughtering his 12 oxen. He feeds the people one last time, and then follows Elijah into the rough and tumble world of being a prophet in 9th century Israel.

So if you're rusty on your knowledge of what was going on in 9th century Israel, think of it like a cringe worthy reality TV show about royal families or celebrities or cut throat palace intrigue. The tribal structure of society was unraveling and giving way to a more and more concentrated monarchy. Local politics were getting engulfed in a larger and larger world stage. Higher and higher stakes alliances were forged as the threat of a strong, surging military from the Philistines was the intensifying concern.

The monarchy in Israel was built more for military protection against the Philistine military machine than it was for any religious or spiritual reasons. The prophetic story that spins itself through this emergence of ancient Israel onto a bigger and bigger stage is foregrounded in the Biblical story, but these scriptural accounts are not meant to be chronological history, they are salvation history—in other words they are religious propaganda—stories told with a particular lens, with a particular agenda—to make it seem as if the political maneuvering and military positioning of these burgeoning global powers was something that God was dictating.

We can't really understand Elisha's story without understanding Elijah's. The verses before we get to Elisha's wrenching leave taking of his lucrative family business, are Elijah bereft in the desert. He feels like he has done everything God asked him to do, and now the Queen of the Omri monarchy wants him dead. Elijah flees to the desert and is told by God to

wait for the Lord to pass by—wind that split open mountains, then an earthquake, then a fire—and God is not in any of these terrifying, wrenching displays of nature’s power—but God comes in the sheer silence.

This term in Hebrew for silence suggests that silence brings with it its own visceral experience—the deafening quiet after the storm—in the embers of destruction, despair, and trauma—the kind of quiet that is hard to sit in—not a sweet breeze, but an eerie still that feels dangerous.

God speaks to Elijah not with the tenderness of a concerned parent, but with the sharpness of a hard-driving coach or military general. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” And then after Elijah tells God his life is in danger, God says, get back in there and keep fighting. And on your way, go get this new assistant who will be able to finish the job.

So, Elijah was in the fix he was in because he was a zealot for the only one God movement. He was challenging King Ahab’s palace because Ahab was allowing the worship of Baal along with the worship of YHWH. And the worship of Baal was something that Ahab refused to stop because it was a political decision.

His Phoenician Queen Jezebel brought with her these practices of Baal worship from her culture. And Ahab was all about building alliances and increasing the social capital and influence of the empire his father, Omri, had built. Elijah was unrelenting and led the One YHWH enthusiasts into an armed battle with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel.

When Queen Jezebel heard that the prophets of her native religion had been slaughtered on Mt. Carmel, she sent word to Elijah that she would avenge their deaths with his death.

Elijah is a legendary figure with much mystery surrounding who he really was. Far from being slaughtered on a battlefield, legend has it that he was translated into another dimension in a chariot of fire—Elisha, his successor, witnessed it.

And Elijah then took a supernatural place in both apocryphal writings and in some religious practices—there are varying beliefs about Elijah that emerged in the ancient world but some included that he knew the suffering of those who were being punished for their sins in Gehenna, a hellish place of suffering after death, and that he would come back when the anti-Christ appeared, and Elisha would usher in the Messiah’s final judgment, and much more—too much for us to get into here.

Suffice it to say, that the lore about Elijah is all wrapped up in the ascending power of monotheism on the world stage. Worshiping multiple gods became a political problem and a reason for murderous remedies as monotheism became a way to nation build.

Where is God in all this? Honestly, it's hard to say sometimes. There are many different gods portrayed in the biblical witness. Views of God vary wildly in scripture—from warlord to mother hen to shepherd to murderous and jealous to generous and merciful and compassionate.

The YHWH-only prophets, like Elijah and Elisha, held a belief that was probably a minority view at the time. But reading back into the salvation history, editors amplified this monotheistic theme.

So much of how the monarchy emerged from the tribal system of judges was driven by military aspirations in light of a strong Philistine military that was a threat to the N and S kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

It was all about politics and power, not so much about doctrine. Religion became a cover for the political maneuvers—a way to signal allegiance in different directions, but Ahab probably didn't have a problem with worshiping both YHWH and Baal. He was fine with it because it was a good political move. And Jezebel didn't have a theological problem with YHWH, she had a political problem with Elijah.

The monotheistic faith traditions have a complicated history. Anytime a religion emerges from a local, indigenous, culturally located practice onto a global stage, its ultimate claims begin to be foregrounded more and more. And the power of the those claims often spreads most robustly when they become politically expedient for those with formal power and military might.

No religion is without its shadows. Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament bear that out over and over again. The Elijah and Elisha accounts in 1 and 2 Kings are iconic examples of why we can never get too comfortable with locating ourselves or our religious identities on the moral high ground all the time.

As the monarchy became more concentrated, more and more people became disenfranchised. There was an increase of injustice, oppression, suffering, and social stratification.

Those who told and handed down and eventually wrote down the stories of Elijah and Elisha had a particular view of prophets. And they were probably from their particular

prophetic guilds. 1 and 2 Kings is not history, it is salvation history, it is propaganda to encourage a certain view of history—from the perspective of the only YHWH prophetic lineage.

Elijah and Elisha are cast as similar to Moses and Joshua. And these prophets took on mythic qualities in the stories their guilds told about them.

They were miracle workers (that could cause suffering or well-being), they were powerful intercessors. They confronted kings about injustice and religious infidelity. They are those who speak an authoritative word. They are those who obey YHWH, the one God. Prophets tell humans to be obedient to YHWH and tell them about the promises God makes and keeps for the faithful.

In all this there are powerful stories of the prophets fighting for the people who were more and more oppressed as the monarchy becomes more powerful. The prophets healed people, they even resurrected some people from the dead, they provided material support for people who were suffering in famine and drought.

And Elijah also slaughtered the prophets of Baal and then got scared and fled when his life was threatened because of his actions. Elisha cursed children who made fun of him, which led to their deaths, and he prompted a coup to overthrow Ahab because he wasn't just worshiping YHWH.

Elisha helped to enthrone King Jehu by killing people, including encouraging Jehu to kill Queen Jezebel. Post-exile editors would try to turn Queen Jezebel into a seductress and associate her religious practice with sexual immorality, but Jezebel was a powerful woman with political savvy—and we do not have the benefit of her supporters getting to write her story for our sacred texts.

Then after all that Elisha did to get Ahab dethroned and secure Jehu's coup to defend the one YHWH movement, Jehu ended up cozying up with the Assyrians and worshiping their gods along with YHWH anyway.

If we're going to talk about call via monotheistic traditions, then we have to look at all of the ways call becomes confused and concealed—and how tenuous our religious impulses are when they become tangled up with political power.

It seems more faithful to be honest that God's call isn't about power and influence at all—that seems more true to form for the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the universe—

who would not have such a limited vision as to think that palace intrigue and military might will be humanity's path to mutual liberation.

Jesus' instruction to any who would listen in his Great Sermon is that call is about trusting a God we are only beginning to get to know.

God tell us the truth not in military might, but in the provisions of the lilies of the field and the barn swallows who can build their nests in the most unlikely crooks and crevices of things—the provisions of call are etched within our created nature, in the flame of divine love that is in each of us. Jesus is drawing from the wisdom traditions of his Jewish heritage. We are made for each other and for right relationship.

And God's calling card will always bear the imprint of that call to restoration of right relationship with each other and with all things and with God.

Jesus' invitation to the crowds to look around them and see how God provides, how things fit together and unfold is his prophetic edge in an age of anxiety and fear.

Faith is changing our relationship to all the bad things that can happen in life. Instead of using our energy to worry about scarcity and death and scanning the horizon for enemies, we are called to use our energy to believe in abundance and in the mysteries of eternity and in our deep connection to everything that is.

Our religious heritage includes all of these things—the violence and the wisdom of our interdependence and the call to social righteousness.

As humans we are built to protect ourselves and to survive. The impulse to fight is one of the options our biology hardwires within us. So, the fighting parts of us are not bad or wrong, they are just parts that need more support—more room to build trustworthy connections so that they don't have to be pushed into such extreme roles and behaviors.

Our faith does not have to be about drawing lines and dying on the mountain of principal and doctrine. Our faith can get back to its most life-giving and sustaining roots—those deeply held truths about our shared humanity and the balance that our human family needs to thrive.

The prophets of old were fighting for the people in one way, shape or form. And they weren't afraid to speak truth to power. They take on different personas and mythologies when portrayed through the filters of conquest and empire, but at their core these

ancestors were trying to faithfully find their way in a confusing and dangerous world. And they had their limits and their frailties, just like we all do.

It seems like all the prophets, including Jesus, were asking people to learn how to be trustworthy, learn how to keep the promises we make. And in our time, I can't imagine a way to build trust and keep promises that condones harm, that condones violence, and that gets caught up in the fever of scarcity and nationalism.

And so we find ourselves here, in this moment in time, marking another call God has made in our human family. The call for Luke Harkema to be the associate pastor at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church.

Pastors in the Presbyterian Church (USA) are not kingmakers these days. And our influence in the halls of congress is far outgunned by the big money lobbies of industry, military, and commerce. And yet, we are called into the work of peddling in social righteousness—that loaded and fraught term of our heritage. We are not called to stay out of politics, we are called into the fray—not because of the fear of scarcity, but because of the trust in God's abundant love.

Scarcity is the result of injustice and greed, not the inescapable nature of human life. And the prophetic voice of our ancestors at its best propels us to never let go of our faith in God's abundant and all-embracing love.

God's call is to all and for all. And God's call is through all—through our communities and our deep connections.

Luke, today we are celebrating your call through the protocols and practices of an institution we call the Presbyterian Church (USA). This is our way of saying that today is not just about you, it's about us, and it's about God. And this is our way of saying we share life in common and you are not alone.

Even as we take heart in the institutional connections that authorize and bless your call to this church, I pray that you can remember that your call is not to an institution or deemed worthy because of doctrines and dogma, your call is from God to a community. The institution involved here to mark this moment and make it official is not our god. The institution is made up of lots of people just like us—who are human with holy imaginations and with lots of questions, we are all people with energy and with limitations.

Call is collective and it can feel lonely, call is promising and it is also risky, call is mysterious and very, very concrete—it makes you move, it changes your orientation to life, it convinces

you to put your life in the hands of strangers and trust that God will provide. You and I, and so many of us here, know the anguish of call—and how much the church itself can call us to question the very concept of call.

And you and I, and so many of us here, know that your whole self is called on—your all is invited to take up space in this call.

Luke, you are here because God is God and you are you—and this is where you belong in God's Holy imagination and in the mysterious unfolding of things. I trust that while the road won't be easy sometimes, it will be healing—not just for you, but for us.

Thank you for your yes to this call. And thanks be to God for this call to us all—to commit to the work of faithfully finding our way together in a promising and perilous world.

Thanks be to God.