

With the possible exception of today's Psalm, our readings this morning can be problematic for our modern sensibilities. Our Gospel features a slave-holder as a sympathetic character; in our Epistle Paul is spitting nails angry, so angry he says exactly what he thinks with no filter and gives no lip service to polite discourse. And, if you know the full Elijah story, lots of people end up dead by violent means. A dear atheist friend of mine might point to the Elijah story as one reason why she finds the idea of God repugnant as expressed in the Old Testament. So what are we to make of all this?

Knowing that the good people who put the lectionary together did so with certain themes in mind, I looked at the collect to see if a hint was contained there for today's theme. The thrust of today's collect seems to be a prayer that those things that harm us are kept away from us, and that we may obtain those things that would benefit us. As I thought about this, it became clear to me that the thread that all three readings have is about placing our faith in God before all else.

Let me give you a little bit of the backstory for each of our readings. Elijah is a prophet to God's chosen people. Ahab, a Jew is the king married to Jezebel, a follower of the gentile god, Ba'al. The people of the

kingdom have suffered from a terrible and long drought. They were concerned that they had been abandoned by God. Ahab and Jezebel tried to hedge their bets and required their subjects to worship both God and Ba'al. Elijah was having none of the "let's hedge our bets". In our reading this morning, he is effectively saying you have to choose. Who do you trust to answer your prayers? Who do you trust to be present with you? And in a spectacular demonstration, shows that God hears and answers prayers, God is indeed trustworthy. Elijah was not having a "my God is better than your god, nanny, nanny boo" moment. What he is trying to convey is make sure that what you put your trust in that which is trustworthy, and give that trust wholeheartedly.

We know seasons - even extended seasons —of drought too. It may not be a literal weather event, but it may be the extended lack of an intimate companion, an extended time of illness, or without meaningful work. It may even be a extended time without adequate leadership in institutions we have come to rely on. In those situations, where do we place our trust? For the last eight years our own country has experienced economic uncertainty in the wake of the housing bubble bursting and the subsequent recovery has been uneven. We have a hard time making

sense of it and so we seek someone or something to blame. Our politicians have turned this into an art form, sowing fear where ever they can, blaming foreigners, non-Christians, and others for our current misfortunes and generating profound mistrust of the government and paralyzing said government in the process. Operating out of fear, the respective parties' bases have presented us with a slate of the least palatable candidates in living memory. We are polarized in ways that some predict that our system of democracy cannot survive. What's a Christian to do? If our trust is in God, and we act on that trust, then this fear that is prevalent right now can have no claim upon us. Easier said then done, I know.

I think a practicing Christian who puts their primary trust in God is able to identify the fear and look beyond it. Such a Christian is able to use his or her reason to evaluate a given position. This is not to say that all practicing Christians will arrive at the same conclusion; they won't. Faithful and engaged conversation, however, will give the Holy Spirit room to work and make God's will apparent.

Other than placing our trust in God, is there an antidote to this fear? Our Gospel passage shows us a way. Just prior to our reading this

morning, Jesus has given his Beatitudes sermon - in Luke's version, the sermon on the plain. And Luke gives us an example of someone who is living out that sermon in the person of the Centurion. What would have been surprising to the Jews in Luke's audience is that a non-Jewish God-fearer would be the person who lives out Jesus' teaching. The Centurion shares this in common with the Good Samaritan. Both the Centurion and the Good Samaritan demonstrate the love and compassion that are at the heart of the Law.<sup>1</sup>

The Centurion demonstrates love of God by being a benefactor of the Jewish community; his wealth, after all, built the local synagogue. The Centurion also demonstrates love of neighbor by his concern and compassion for his slave. The reading gives us the sense that the Centurion and the slave have more than an overseer/worker relationship - there is caring between the two of them. Finally, the Centurion has placed his faith, his trust in Jesus. Luke wants us to see that faithfulness is not dependent upon membership within a certain group, and that economic

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Anderson Love, "Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 3*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2010, 94.

and social status do not matter.<sup>2</sup> This is the type of faithfulness, belief, or trust that God expects and wants from us.

Paul is in full agreement with Luke, and this is why he is so angry in his letter to the churches in Galacia. We can infer from his letter that he is writing at the time when the conflict over whether the Gospel is just for Jews or extends to gentiles is at its height. Paul has already shared the Gospel message in Galacia and found an eager and receptive audience. Subsequent to Paul's visit, these new Christians had interactions with disciples from the church in Jerusalem. Apparently these disciples told these churches something to the effect of: "Paul gave you the Cliff Notes version of the Gospel - you don't have the full story. We'll give you the full story and you must first become Jewish (and if you're a guy you have to be circumcised) and comply with all the Jewish laws."<sup>3</sup>

From the perspective of the Church in Jerusalem, Jesus message was about Jewish practices and Jewish relationship with God. To abandon Judaism for these folks is something like my request to you asking you to

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<sup>2</sup> Verlee A. Copeland, "Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word Year C Vol 3*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2010, 97.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Raymond E., *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (Yale University Press: New Haven & London), 1997, 467 - 473.

stand during corporate prayers at worship - it is different, it will be uncomfortable, and it will feel just plain wrong.

Paul is practically standing on his head saying: “no, no, no ... the Good News in Jesus Christ is that His love for us anticipates us and envelopes us such that every other authority, be it religious, civil or social is completely secondary. Whether one is a Jew or a gentile, whether slave or Roman citizen doesn’t matter - that status does not need to change in order to be a follower of Jesus. Jesus’ willingness to die on the cross is ample demonstration that divine love for all of humanity is unconditional. Paul believes with all his being that there is no practice and no authority that deserves our deepest loyalty. Our deepest loyalty belongs to God alone.<sup>4</sup>

From these three readings this morning then, this is my take away message. In my practice of being a Christian I place my complete trust in God. When I put my complete trust in God, I have no reason to fear anything. As I put my complete trust in God, I am motivated to love God as God loves you and me - unconditionally, and to show that same kind of love to all of God’s creation.

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<sup>4</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “Exegetical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word Year C Vol 3*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2010, 88.

Now I mentioned that I am a practicing Christian. I am aware that I will never get it completely right. I realize that my desire for control gets in the way of my being able to completely trust God, to completely love God and to show God's love to others. I know, however, that trying to do this counts. In putting this into practice, it will affect my politics and how I vote. It affects how I perceive the future of our parish. I know that practicing my faith, my trust in God will not lead me to agreement with everyone I met. However, my faith and trust in God will keep me engaged with those with whom I disagree. And I think that this is what is part of what God wants from all of us.