

Sermon for June 26, 2016 – “Gimme Some Kind of Sign”

10th Sunday in OT, Year C – Text(s): 1st Kings 18:20-39

A Sunday school teacher was carefully explaining the story of Elijah the Prophet and the false prophets of Baal. She explained how Elijah built the altar, put wood upon it, cut the steer in pieces and laid it upon the altar. And then Elijah commanded the people of God to fill four barrels of water and pour it over the altar. He had them do this four times. “Now,” said the teacher, “can anyone in the class tell me why the Lord would have Elijah pour water over the steer on the altar?” A little girl in the back of the room enthusiastically raised her hand. “To make the gravy,” came her reply.

I resent Elijah. Yeah, I mean the Old Testament prophet. The guy in the Books of Kings (the original and the sequel) who yanked the holier-than-thou rug out from under the bad boys of Baal. Midway through 1st Kings Elijah goes “mano-a-mano” with four hundred and fifty of Baal’s finest. It was the Yahweh vs. Baal in a winner-take-all match where each side sought to demonstrate the dominance of their deity. Picture this in your minds, a crowd gathered for a contest of Biblical proportions. The networks, cable outlets and papyrus media showed up in force. NBC and Fox News jostled for the best camera angle with Al Jazeera. A well-coiffed anchor from CNN (that would be the Canaanite News Network) elbowed the snarky reporter from the New Galilee Times. Ground rules were established. A bull would be sacrificed. Human hands couldn’t touch the cow, God alone would do the bovine deed. The Baal Gang went first beseeching their god to work wonders. Show the people a sign! Nothing. Throats raw and lungs heaving all 450 voices ceased. Silence reigned. Expectations grew. Elijah strode forward. He made a request of the Lord, the divine One, God with a capital G. I’ll condense it – the preamble to one of the best outdoor barbeques depicted in the entire bible with this simple phrase: Give ‘em a sign, God! And guess what? The Lord Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, Universe Maker and Divine One did just that. And what a sign – wow! A serious smack down of biblical proportions! The bull got sacrificed! Grilled glory! Holy Smoke! Hooray for God. Hooray for God’s prophet. You get the idea...

And yet this is where I resent Elijah. I mean, why can’t I have signs like Elijah? I’m not kidding. Not necessarily burning bushes or grilling cattle in our backyards, but wouldn’t we all like God to be a tad more obvious? Is it too much to ask? I mean, it’s not like when we were kids and wanted to know what the future held. You know, like whether we were going to get stuff we’d asked for at Christmas, or an “A” on the upcoming algebra test. While that would’ve been nice that’s not what I’m talking about. No, what I’m talking about is just something from God that lets us know whether we’re on the right path. A gentle nudge to make sure we make the right choice or some sense that we’re about to hit a rough patch in our lives. Who wouldn’t?

Well, some people believe they have. As it happens, I’ve talked to lots of people who will swear to it. And, of course, in recent years, a bevy of books have chronicled personal experiences in heaven. Proof of an afterlife spawned best-sellers for this life. For example, Todd Burpo’s Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy’s Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back, or Dr. Eben Alexander’s Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife. During my time at Hershey Med. Center, and in the years since, I’ve met folks who’ve shared stories about inexplicable “signs.” Something that confirmed a loved one had communicated with them in some way after death.

In my own life, there's been a complete absence of signs. I was in a near fatal car accident in 1986 and was a bit irked when I didn't have a "near death" experience. I nearly bled to death and was in and out of consciousness for nearly an hour, and would you believe, not one glimpse of the Pearly Gates. And unless you count the ambulance headlights – no bright light! Nothing!

I remember that while I was wrestling with the question of what I felt God was calling me to do...Did he want me to go to seminary? Did he want me to be a pastor or continue doing youth ministry? I'd ask him for some kind of clear sign. Something! Anything! Now, there was a holly bush by the front door of the townhouse where Jane and I lived in Maryland during seminary. I'd come home from work and pass the bush, stopping to stare at it while I found my house key to unlock the front door. I don't think I seriously thought I'd ever arrive home to actually find it burning (which I would've taken as a clear sign that God approved of what I was doing), but I was still disappointed when I didn't. So, yeah, I admit that I'm jealous of Elijah.

At the same time, I'm thankful for Elijah's contest with the Baal Boys. His tale helps believers glimpse the ancient (and yet still relevant) conflict between polytheism and monotheism, between stale fears and sacred hopes, false gods and the one, true God. Burning bushes and talking donkeys are rare as are glimpses of heaven. The bull ambles away, becoming neither spare ribs nor a petty god's sacrifice while questions about important matters remain unanswered and we agonize over them.

Todd Burpo's kid scampers through paradise but all most of us get are next month's bills. Elijah got his Holy answer, so why can't the signs along the roads of our lives offer divine guidance? Brothers and sisters, here's the thing...I think they do! I believe lots of us have experienced what've been referred to, among other things, as holy nudges, Godly gestures, and sacred whispers. Now, I could very well be wrong, but think about it for a moment. I mean, it could very well have been merely endorphins or right-brained intuition, but can you remember a time when you'd managed to say the right thing at the right time? A situation when you'd chosen silence when you'd usually blather on? When we risked the unfamiliar, embraced the fear, named the demon, opened a door or kept it closed? When we did something we didn't **think** we could do, all because we sensed something – someone – guiding us?

When I think about it, most of the "signs" that I've experienced are (at best) guesses and glimpses, at once fragile and fleeting. And with just enough vulnerability, I look back on my life and believe that God has provided me with signs. None were as bullish (pun intended!) as Elijah's, and none transported me to heaven...darn it! But sacred whispers have and continue to lure me forward toward that which God has in store for me. I believe that's how God works. I believe that's why we're to be still and know that he is God. That's why I try to pay attention; at least I think that's what we're supposed to do. And I can tell you that so far that, for me, it's been pretty darn amazing!

So, let me ask all of you: What signs of wonder have you seen? Notice, I'm not asking if you've ever seen a sign...No, I'm asking: What signs have we seen? What whispers have we heard? But I have to ask this too, especially of those who might claim never to have seen a sign or heard a whisper... What might we have **missed**? What might we have seen or heard and not recognized them for what they were? What might we have ignored altogether? Either because we've refused to listen, or because we thought God could not possibly have been trying to get our attention?

It's like the story of the very religious man who was once caught in rising floodwaters. A terrible storm came into a town and local officials sent out an emergency warning that the riverbanks would soon overflow and flood the nearby homes. They ordered everyone in the town to evacuate immediately. A faithful Christian man heard the warning and decided to stay, saying to himself, "I will trust God and if I am in danger, then God will send me a sign." The neighbors came by his house and said to him, "We're leaving and there is room for you in our car, please come with us!" But the man declined. "I'm waiting for a sign from God!" As the man stood on his porch watching the water rise up the steps, a man in a canoe paddled by and called to him, "Hurry and come into my canoe, the waters are rising quickly!" But the man again said, "No thanks, I'm waiting for a sign from God!" The floodwaters rose higher pouring water into his living room and the man had to retreat to the second floor. A police motorboat came by and saw him at the window. "Let us rescue you!" they shouted. But the man refused, waving them off saying, "I'm waiting for a sign from God!" The flood waters rose higher and higher and the man had to climb up to his rooftop. A helicopter spotted him and dropped a rope ladder. A rescue officer came down the ladder and pleaded with the man, "Grab my hand and I will pull you up!" But the man still refused, folding his arms tightly to his body. "No thanks! I'm waiting for a sign from God!" Shortly after, the house broke up and the floodwaters swept the man away and he drowned. When in Heaven, the man stood before the Lord... He's a little bit miffed, so he says: "Lord, I've been a good man all my life! Why'd you let me drown in the flood? Why didn't you send me a sign?" The Lord said, "What are you talking about – I did. I sent you a car, a canoe, a motorboat and a helicopter. "What more were you looking for?"

I think it all boils down to the kind of person we are. Are we the kind that sees signs, that sees miracles? Or do we believe that people just get lucky, that it's all just happenstance? Is it possible that there are no coincidences? Is the old saying true: that coincidences are simply miracles that God doesn't want to take credit for? Perhaps we need to look for signs. Perhaps we need to pay closer attention.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.