February 28, 2016

Job 37:1-5

“The Gift of Being Thunderstruck”

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1 Kings 19:11-13 New Revised Standard Version

He said, “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?”

CONTEMPORARY READING (Susan Orlean)

There’s a certain orchid that looks exactly like a certain insect so the insect is drawn to this flower—its double, its soul mate—and wants nothing more than to make love to it. After the insect flies off, it spots another soul-mate flower and makes love to it, thus pollinating it. And neither flower nor the insect will ever understand the significance of their lovemaking. I mean, how could they know that because of their little dance the world lives, but it does. By simply doing what they’re designed to do, something large and magnificent happens. In this sense they show us how to live, how the only barometer you have is your heart; how when you spot your flower you can’t let anything get in your way.

I was a chaplain at Children’s Medical Center for a summer while I was studying to be a pastor. There was a group of us who were summer interns and there was this one guy that I did not like. He was studying to be a priest and I thought he was useless. He was always in the cafeteria reading a book. Sure, it was a book about God, but he wasn’t talking with the patients, he wasn’t on the hospital floor, he wasn’t doing what he should have been doing. One day all the summer interns were meeting with the supervisor. And he called out this guy for what a great job he was doing. I was flabbergasted. The supervisor talked about walking by a room where a child was dying and the family was gathered around the hospital bed. And this guy was standing by the family with both of his hands on people’s backs. He wasn’t saying anything wise, he wasn’t praying, he was standing there with his hands on people’s backs.

The supervisor talked about how wonderful that was because he wasn’t trying to fix it, he wasn’t trying to say the right thing, he was fully present in the midst of the pain and showing with his hands on the family’s backs that he was with them and that God was with them. And it was such a clear image to me. I could see him there. I could feel what that was like. He might have wanted to run back to the cafeteria and to his books. He might have wanted to walk right on by that hospital room that was in such pain. But he didn’t. He entered the pain. He entered the hurt. And he knew what to do. He knew that he was going to stay there, and to be a presence for that family, and to show with his hands that he was with them.

“Have you ever experienced a sudden flash of insight or awareness that rocked your whole world”?[[1]](#footnote-2) As the supervisor described the scene that he saw that day as he walked by the hospital room, I knew that my judgements were wrong and hurtful and I also knew that God was speaking to me. I knew that as a Christian I wanted to be standing with people in their pain. I wanted to be holding my hands on their backs letting them know that they were not alone. The divine was speaking to me in that flash of insight. It was a moment of clarity, or as Oprah says it was an “aha” moment for me. And I could feel myself letting go of the judgment because I had been grasping onto that way too tightly. And I saw this fellow chaplain in that hospital room with his hands on people’s backs and I felt everything clicked into place. I felt all warm and tingly inside. I felt peaceful.

In the book we are studying this Lent, “Gifts of the Dark Wood” by Eric Elnes, he talks about those times when the divine is speaking to us. It might have been when we encountered our first love or when a child was born or when we out for a casual walk only to return a different person.[[2]](#footnote-3) It is those moments in our lives when a lightbulb comes on and something clicks into place that impacts our life’s direction in some way.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Our scripture today of Elijah in the cave is one that speaks to me of God’s voice. Elijah is hiding out; he is on the run. He is in a dark cave; in a dark wood you might say. Elijah had just finished the contest with the prophets of Baal. Do you remember that story? Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal have a contest to see whose god is the real deal. They set up two altars, one for the prophets of Baal and one for Elijah the prophet of God. They each kill a bull and put it on the altar. The contest will be to see which god can light the fire. The prophets of Baal do their thing, they dance and shout, but no fire.

Now it is Elijah’s turn and he tells the people watching to come close. He digs a big trench around the altar and fills it with water and pours water all over the bull and the wood. Then Elijah prays and a fire comes down, burns up the offering, the wood, the stones, the dust, and even licks up the water in the trench. Then the part we mostly skip over in the children’s version, Elijah has the prophets of Baal seized and Elijah executes all 450 of them. Since the prophets of Baal were Jezebel’s prophets, she is not pleased and vows to kill Elijah. So, Elijah runs and after a day he is exhausted and hopeless. He says that he wants to die because he is no better than his ancestors.

Elijah had been this person of strength and determination, but now he is hungry, exhausted, dejected, and even suicidal. He goes to sleep and an angel wakes him up and sitting on a hot stone is a cake freshly baked and a jar of water. The angel tells him to eat and he does and then he goes back to sleep. Later the angel wakes him with more food and water and the angel tells him he will need his strength.

On that food Elijah walks for forty days and forty nights and makes his way to Mount Horeb where Moses is said to have received the Ten Commandments. Elijah finds a cave and spends the night. God comes to him and asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah says, “I have been very zealous for God, 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.” They are after me and they want to kill me. And God doesn’t say, “Oh, I am so sorry, I know that you have been such a wonderful prophet.” God tells Elijah to go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by. And earth, wind and fire show up. Not the band, but the elemental forces. And then the sound of sheer silence. The calm, whispering voice. And Elijah wraps his face in his mantle and goes out and stands at the entrance of the cave.

Have you ever heard the sound of sheer silence? It is the words we want to say when there are no words. The ancients thought the thunder, earthquakes, fire and lightning were communications from the gods. How did Elijah know that God was not in the earthquake, wind, and fire? The same way we know when we are able to listen. It calls to our deepest self and feels most natural. Sometimes it is when we are at the bottom. When perhaps like Elijah, we don’t even know why we are alive.

Our contemporary reading today was from Susan Orlean’s book “The Orchid Thief” which was made into a movie called “Adaptation”. An orchid hunter reminds us about what it is like to sense the call when he speaks of the attraction between a bee and the specific orchid it is meant to pollinate. When we do what brings us alive in this world we have become a channel for loving our neighbor as ourselves. Each of us is responding to an inner sense of love, joy, humility, and service.

In “Gift of the Dark Wood” Elnes says according to the ancients, you don’t need to be a saint or spiritual master to experience profound awakening. You don’t even have to be “above average”. All you really need to be is struggling.[[4]](#footnote-5) Because then we can wrap our faces in our mantles and walk out of the dark cave into the world, the cold world that is filled with uncertainty and violence. And we do that because the sheer silence beckons us. May we know today that all of us have a meaning and a purpose to our lives, a calling that is unique to us and brings us fully alive.[[5]](#footnote-6)

1. Eric Elnes, “Gifts of the Dark Wood” p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Eric Elnes, “Gifts of the Dark Wood” p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Eric Elnes, “Gifts of the Dark Wood” p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Eric Elnes, “Gifts of the Dark Wood” p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Eric Elnes, “Gifts of the Dark Wood” p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)