



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

www.mzluth.org

August 3, 2008

12th Sunday after Pentecost

1 Kings 19:9-18

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: 1 Kings 19:9-18

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 73

Second Lesson: Romans 9:1-5

Gospel: Matthew 14:22-33

Appearances Can be Deceiving

From Monday to Thursday this last week, I was in St. Peter, Minnesota for the National Conference on Worship, Music and the Arts for our church body. We had worship every morning and worship every evening, late at night, different services, and powerful choirs. Worship that you have to really experience to understand the intensity and the power of the Gospel as it is presented in these ways. One of the things I heard over and over at some of the presentations that I went to during the day was that we often have a misunderstanding about worship.

If you ask people after worship, later in the day on a Sunday or whenever they went to worship, if they liked or disliked it, they will probably talk more about how they liked the tunes of the hymns that we sang or "the pastor held my interest" or "I didn't like the tunes that we sang and I don't like that hymn." Kind of what ends up happening is that we miss the point. We have the wrong expectations. Sometimes we plant our seats on the seat of the pew and we think "worship is all about me, what I like, what I dislike, and I've had a tough week so doggone it pastor, you better entertain me and keep me awake." We kind of miss the point. We have the wrong expectation. We need to get over ourselves. Worship is not about us. It's about God.

Do we walk out of worship saying, "Man, I've got a wonderful God who loves me and forgives me in spite of who I am," or do we walk out saying, "Boy, I hated the tune of that third hymn we sang today. That just ruined my day for me." Are we looking at our own belly buttons, or are we looking at God? If we come out of it disappointed at times, maybe it's because we are focused on the wrong thing and we have the wrong expectation. But then again, that really shouldn't surprise us.

The words I read to you this morning from 1 Kings a couple of times are about a guy who had the wrong expectations. In fact, human beings have made a career out of having the wrong expectations ever since the fall into sin. I can understand, and you probably can too, why Elijah had the expectation of God whipping up a storm and letting those who would oppose him have it. If you haven't read the story of the life of Elijah, you should get out your Bible and start going through 1 Kings because there is some amazing stuff that Elijah went through.

He was the prophet of God to the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the time of Ahab and Jezebel, king and queen of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The tribes had already separated and if you remember anything about the Northern Kingdom, they were all godless. And if you remember anything about Ahab and Jezebel, they were the worst

of the worst. If you call someone a “Jezebel” today, it’s an insult, right? If you call a woman a “Jezebel,” that comes from 1 Kings. That’s how wicked she was.

Shortly before this, the chapter before this, in 1 Kings 18 came that one event in Elijah’s life at Mt. Carmel that you probably remember. It was the great Pillsbury bake-off with bulls, right? “You prophets of Baal, you guys take a bull, prepare it and call on Baal and if he consumes it with fire, he is god. And I will take a bull, I will prepare it and I will call on the Lord and if he consumes it with fire, he is God.” Do you remember that? Trash-talking Elijah saying, “Shout a little louder, cut yourself a little deeper, maybe he’s sleeping, maybe he’s on vacation” and he just kind of rubbed their noses in it a little bit. But nothing happened. And then when Elijah called on the name of the Lord, here comes the fire, licks up the water and consumes it. And then, if you remember what happened after that, Elijah had the people take and make prophet-kabobs out of the 450 prophets of Baal. They ran them through with the sword and the spear. Blood is running everywhere. The ground is stained red with the blood of the false prophets.

Now, Elijah’s life was one of peaks and valleys. Mt. Carmel was definitely a peak. God had acted when he called on Him in an amazing way and God had sent rain after the years of drought also immediately after this. He returns to Damascus. He returns to where Jezebel was, the crowned city, and now he expects Ahab and Jezebel also to fall in line. The only problem is that they don’t. Jezebel says, “I am going to deal with you just like you dealt with them, and may Baal deal with me ever so severely if by this time tomorrow you’re blood isn’t staining the ground”—peaks and valleys.

So Elijah runs off into the desert. He runs off and hides and wants to die. He holds his breath and says, “Lord, you gave me this great victory and now you have turned your back on me. You’ve went away. Come on God, why aren’t you letting them have it? How come you aren’t acting in a powerful, forceful way still so that these people see that you are God?” And he says, “Just take me out of this world. I’ve had enough. I’ve failed like everyone else. No one is listening. I’m the only one left. The altars of God are gone and God, it seems to me, right here, right now, you are gone.” That is kind of in the message that Elijah spoke, isn’t it?

He had expected when God showed His wrath that that wrath would shake the people up and lead them back to God. His expectations were all screwed up. God shows him that. He comes and listens to his complaint. He doesn’t address his complaint. He just says, “Go stand in the corner of the mountain,” right? “I am going to cause my glory to pass by you.” He is standing there—can you picture it? This wind comes that is tearing the mountain apart? Can you feel the splinters of stone stinging his cheeks? All around him there is destruction. All around him the power of God is so evident just like it was on Mt. Carmel. But God’s glory isn’t there.

Next comes the earthquake that moves the mountain under him. He is standing in a big vat of Jigglers now. The whole ground is moving. That has to be a weird feeling, right? But once again, the power is on display but the glory of the Lord is not present.

Next comes fire, and by now Elijah has probably figured out that God's glory isn't going to be revealed in something that is this powerful. And he is right. The glory of the Lord is not there.

Then comes the unexpected. What Elijah did not expect, what Elijah did not want from God, next came the gentle whisper. And when the gentle whisper is heard, Elijah knows he is in the presence of the holy God whom he has doubted, whom he has challenged and who has just showed him that he was wrong. He covers his face with his cloak. And though the earth isn't moving anymore, you have to believe his knees still are, right? He threw his fist at God and told God how God should act and now God is showing him that God acts in the ways that He knows is best and that Elijah's expectations were all messed up. Elijah wanted power. Elijah wanted wrath. Elijah wanted all that poured out, but God works in the gentle whisper of the Gospel. He works through His love and through His mercy, which are not as earth shattering as His Law. The gentle whisper of the glory of the Lord is in His grace, His love and His mercy that redeems wretched sinners like Elijah and like you and like me.

God asked him the same question, "What are you doing here?" It's kind of like when you've made a whole bunch of cookies and you've told your kids "Don't eat them. Those are for Pastor Ott." Okay, maybe you don't say that. But you walk into the room and there is your kid with cookie on his cheek, cookie in his hands and crumbs all over the counter and you say to him, "What are you doing?" Well, you know darn well what he's doing, right? That's kind of like God saying, "What are you doing?" to Elijah.

God knew but He wanted Elijah to see the folly of what he was doing, so He asked him again. Elijah gives the same answer, but this time I have to believe it isn't in the same tone of voice because he has begun to understand that his expectations were wrong.

Think of how we hurt ourselves when our expectations are wrong. Use the example that we used at the beginning. If our expectation of worship is to have things we like, always have tunes that we love and things that happen that entertain us and things like that, and if we are singing a hymn that has some incredible poetry, some incredible words, some incredible promises of God put into a meter that sticks in our mind but we are so busy whining about the tune that we miss the message of the hymn. And it's exactly what we need Tuesday afternoon when we are sitting in that meeting and our faith is being challenged and our integrity is being challenged. We are missing what God had provided for us to strengthen us because we wanted something a little more peppy on Sunday.

We can screw ourselves up by having the wrong expectations of God. And I think all too often we do it. We do it individually. We want God to act in a certain way at a certain time, but God isn't always going to do that. God sees the whole big picture and we are looking at one pin prick on the timeline of eternity. He is going to act in a way that He promises is always best for our eternal good. And we are so often focused on our immediate comfort, happiness or contentment that we miss what God has for us.

Sometimes we also want God to act in power on those who have harmed us. Can I understand why Elijah wanted God's wrath poured out on Jezebel and Ahab? You bet!

If someone tells me “I’m going to kill you,” I’m probably going to think “I’d just as soon see you dead also.”

Maybe when people hurt us we would like to see God’s wrath poured out on them, at least to the degree of “man, I don’t like it when the wicked prosper and the righteous seem to suffer. I would like to see God cause a little more suffering among the wicked from time to time.” Have you ever had that thought cross your mind? Again, our expectations can be off. God can be using the things that we suffer through to remind us to walk closer to God and not just rely on ourselves all the time. Because when things are going good, you and I can get full of ourselves and have a big head and twist our arm out of its socket patting ourselves on the back and forget about God’s blessing. And it’s during times of suffering that God often leads us to rely on him.

Congregationally too I think we can get expectations mixed up. God tells us he is going to work through the gentle whisper of the Gospel. The gentle whisper of the Gospel is not always all that dramatic. This morning, the gentle whisper of the Gospel through water and the Word washed away Isaiah’s sins, right? Did he even wake up to look at it and see it going on? Here is something amazing, something incredible, the most amazing thing that ever happened in Isaiah’s life and he slept through it. Just like some of you do through the Gospel every Sunday, right?

God works in ways that don’t always draw attention to Himself or to what is going on. The constant ongoing proclamation of the Gospel changes hearts. It shows us just who God is and what He has done. His Law shows us where we failed Him and His Gospel shows us this incredible love that forgives us for all the times that we have doubted and wanted something different. And then that moves us to serve Him more faithfully and with more joy and not out of obligation. In congregational life we often fall back on obligation. We kind of shame someone into serving in some way, shape or form because if they don’t do it, no one else will. We are using the wrong tool. We are trying to use the Law where only the Gospel can work. We want to see more immediate actions in addressing financial concerns so we think we have to use something more powerful than the Gospel. We have to get out there and do something to let people have it so that they start responding to God’s love more rapidly and use the Law to motivate.

The gentle whisper of the Gospel is what produces ongoing, long-lasting results, and that’s how God has chosen to tell us “This is how I want you to work. Use my Law to admonish. Don’t use my Law to motivate. Use my Gospel to forgive and to motivate. Don’t use it to admonish.” But our expectations can get turned upside down at times.

It’s sad, because the most powerful tool that we could ever have is that gentle whisper of the Gospel. God brings it to us in the water. He brings it to us in the wine and the wafer. He brings it to us in the Word. He tells us to immerse ourselves in it so that we know it ever better and that it permeates our thoughts and our outlooks so that it changes our attitudes and our outlook and changes our actions so that that powerful Gospel flows through us to touch the lives of others. That is what he has called us to do. Then he tells us, just like he told Elijah, “Trust that I’m still acting even when you can’t see the results. Even when you don’t see a baby stir when he is baptized, know

that I have forgiven that baby's sins and I have brought him the gift of faith. Even when you don't see the fruits of the Gospel as immediately as soon as you would like in those you share the Gospel with, know that I am working."

Isn't that what he told Elijah? "Here is what you are going to do Elijah. Suck it up and get back to the work of being a prophet. You go back to the desert of Damascus, anoint Hazael king over Aram," not even a part of the kingdom of Israel, but "you go anoint him because this is one of the tools I am going to use. Then go anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel." Think of what that would have meant for Elijah to hear. Ahab and Jezebel were the thorns in his side, right? "Anoint Jehu king over Israel" means Ahab and Jezebel's days are numbered. God knows what he is doing.

"Then anoint your own successor because I am not going to leave my people without someone to speak my Word to them—Elisha." He tells him "they are going to do the work that I have given them to do and they will act and I will work through them to accomplish what I intend—not in your time and in your way, but in my time and in my way." Then he says to him, "you know what? There are still 7,000. You think you are all alone? There are still 7,000 that haven't kissed Baal. You are not alone, but now you are an army of one, and you go out there, and you do the work I called you to do. Enough of this pity. Enough of feeling sorry for yourself. Get back to using the gentle whisper of the Gospel to bind the broken hearts of those to whom you have proclaimed the Law."

It's the same thing for you and me. Instead of sitting around feeling sorry about what hasn't been done or who isn't doing what, God tells us to look at ourselves because that's who we control. We don't control what someone else does. We control ourselves. So for ourselves, speak the Gospel to our own hearts. Acknowledge where we have fallen before God, where we have put our trust into something besides the Gospel. Acknowledge and confess it to God that we have often doubted Him and His presence and His love and His purpose and say, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." And then immerse yourself in that gentle whisper that says, "Depart in peace. Your sins are forgiven."

Then be that army of one yourself in whatever role God has put you; as husband or father, wife or mother, child, employer or employee, in every area of service, as faithfully as you can, where God has called you, knowing that as you serve in that way, you are serving the Lord and this is where He has placed you and this is where He wants you to live so that you can earn the right to proclaim the gentle whisper of the Gospel to all those that you come into contact with. And then do it and trust God will move hearts one at a time and that He will change lives and that He will change attitudes and that He will bless us in more ways than we could ask for or imagine.

But He asks us to trust Him. He demands that we trust Him. And He promises that when we trust Him, He will bless us in ways that we couldn't even figure out with our puny little brains because He is the God that doesn't act in power. He is the God that acts in love. Expect that.