

AUGUST 9TH, 2015: NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

I Kings 19:4-8 Ephesians 4:30-5:2 John 6:41-51

Last week I stressed the need for strength and determination in following God for a lifetime. I especially reflected on the evangelist John's belief that the Eucharist is a major force in our maintaining that strength and determination.

But today's first reading brings up a unique problem in our following of God. Elijah discovers that Yahweh doesn't always lead him along the most direct route. Sometimes God even changes his destination!

Our I Kings pericope actually provides us with just the middle of a three part narrative. The whole account begins with a confrontation between the prophets of the fertility god Ba'al and Elijah on Mt. Carmel. Elijah wins the confrontation, has his rivals put to death, then must quickly run for his life when Queen Jezebel – the pagan prophets' patroness – puts a contract out on him. He travels – on foot – from Palestine's northernmost point (Mt. Carmel) to its southernmost point (the Sinai), where today's passage kicks in.

Physically unable to go any further, Elijah actually asks Yahweh to kill him. "Take my life," he pleads, "for I am no better than my fathers." Fortunately God ignores his request and twice sends an angel with a "hearth cake and a jug of water," making certain the prophet has enough strength to "walk forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb (Mt. Sinai.)"

The difficulty arises in the third part of the narrative. When Elijah finally reaches Mt. Sinai, Yahweh comes to him in a "gentle breeze" and abruptly informs him that he's in the wrong place! Instead of preaching to the scorpions in the wilderness, Yahweh wants him in Syria - north of where he originally started his trek – setting up a mechanism to get rid of Jezebel.

At first glance, this change in direction makes sense. All of us have had to make changes in the paths we've chosen in life. But there's a unique problem with this change: by twice sending an angel with food and water, Yahweh actually helped Elijah go in the wrong direction! Since the prophet couldn't have made it to Sinai without God's assistance, God's responsible for Elijah's ending up in a place he/she didn't want him to be.

The Pauline disciple who wrote Ephesians makes sense when he encourages his readers to get rid of "all bitterness, fury, anger, shouting and reviling." All other Christs agree that we should be "kind to one another, compassionate, and forgiving." Yet Elijah would remind us that true discipleship goes further than just creating peaceful, compassionate relationships with one another. It also includes developing a relationship with a God who sometimes messes with our spiritual GPS.

Jewish members of John's community had to deal with a parallel experience when they converted to Christianity. As good Jews they'd been constantly encouraged to distinguish between the "sacred and the profane." We presume that through the centuries it was Yahweh who helped the Chosen People reach the point in their faith lives when that sacred/profane division became an essential part of everyone and everything they encountered. Yet now, as followers of the risen Jesus, they've discovered the most sacred of persons is actually in an individual whose "father and mother we know."

No dedicated Israelite could ever have anticipated that Yahweh would one day ask his/her followers to drastically change directions and realize that a carpenter from Capernaum had become the "bread of life" for all people.

Almost every biblical author encourages us to surface the distinct path God wishes us to travel through life. Yet, Elijah's Sinai experience also teaches us to keep our eyes and ears open, willing to change directions at any moment Yahweh's breezy voice breaks into our lives.

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AUGUST 16TH, 2015: TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Proverbs 9:1-6 Ephesians 5:15-20 John 6:51-58

There are Scripture scholars today who believe the author of this part of John's gospel was influenced by the Greek philosopher Plato. Living over three hundred years before Jesus' birth, this famous thinker developed a fascinating analogy to explain how we live our lives. We're chained in a cave, facing the rear wall, the cave entrance behind us. The only thing we can see is the shadows that appear on that wall, shadows created by the sun shining behind objects as they pass in front of the cave. Though we think we're seeing real things, we're only seeing their shadows. The real, true world is behind us.

That's where, according to Plato, philosophers come in. They not only unchain us, they also force us to turn around and actually perceive the real and the true; a quest in which everyone is expected to engage.

If John wasn't directly influenced by Plato, he certainly shared the philosopher's basic insight. Notice how his Jesus speaks about the Eucharistic bread and wine: "My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink." Any other food and drink we consume is simply a shadow of the real, true food and drink which Jesus offers. The risen Jesus is the one who breaks our chains, turns us around, and exposes us to the real.

Not only does this reality break through in the Eucharist, it also leads us to the true, eternal life for which all of us long. Jesus couldn't be clearer: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day."

John isn't the only biblical author who tells us we're not always dealing with the real in our everyday lives. The unknown author of the letter to the Ephesians also goes down that path. In today's pericope, for instance, he reminds his readers that in order to experience the will of God in their daily lives they must approach those lives from a totally different perspective than the non-believers around them. He expects them to be reflective, watching carefully how they live, valuing each moment. Only by being open to the Spirit working in everyone and everything they encounter will they discover the meaning God has placed in each of their lives. Once they've experienced the risen Jesus, they can never again be content with just looking at a shadow-filled wall.

Though the author of Proverbs knew nothing of the risen Jesus, he was also convinced that people of faith saw things others missed. They accomplished this by developing "wisdom:" by surfacing patterns in God's behavior in their everyday lives. (It's important to note that our Scriptures present us with a "wisdom debate." Some authors, like those responsible for the books of Wisdom and Proverbs argued such patterns not only existed, they could actually be found and learned. Others, like the author of Job, contended God's behavior patterns were simply the figment of fertile imaginations. Yahweh simply did whatever Yahweh wanted to do, whenever and to whom Yahweh decided to do it.)

Whether divine patterns exist or not, our Proverbs writer knew that true people of faith had to engage in a constant quest for "understanding." They were committed to encountering a God who would lead them beyond the point at which most people stopped, a point in which they would break the chains which limited their field of vision.

Our sacred authors not only saw things most of us miss, they were committed to helping their readers come out of the shadows and see and benefit some of those same life-giving things.

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