

AUGUST 12TH, 2018: NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

Glad to read in today's gospel pericope that Jesus "is the one who is from God" and "has seen the Father." Much of what we Christians know about God comes through Jesus, who according to John is one with God.

People, like the Pauline disciple responsible for Ephesians, can also look at the risen Jesus and come up with some important divine characteristics we're expected to imitate. He/she's kind, compassionate, forgiving. "All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, reviling (and) malice" are *verboden*. If we accept the challenge to be other Christs, we have no choice but to work on developing these aspects of our own personality.

Yet there's one aspect of God with which many of us have problems, something Elijah eventually discovered in today's first reading. But to appreciate this characteristic, we have to know what comes immediately before our I Kings passage, and what comes immediately after it.

The actual narrative begins with Elijah executing the prophets of Ba'al on Mt. Carmel, in Israel's far north. The prophets' patroness, Queen Jezebel, when told about their demise, immediately puts a contract out on Elijah. Fearing for his life, he runs south, the length of the country, down to Beer-Sheba (about 130 miles) where our liturgical reading kicks in. Encountering the "angel of Yahweh," he twice receives enough food and water to go at least another 250 miles south to Mt. Horeb (Mt. Sinai). His whole trip – on foot - from Mt. Carmel to Mt. Sinai is about 400 miles.

The difficulty comes when the prophet eventually reaches Mt. Sinai and Yahweh appears to him in the cool breeze to inform him he doesn't want him there! God unbelievably expects Elijah to backtrack to Damascus – more than 40 miles north of Mt. Carmel – and carry on his ministry there.

Instead of originally leaving Mt. Carmel and walking directly to Damascus, Elijah takes an 800-mile detour. Anyone can take a wrong turn on their own. But Yahweh actually helped Elijah go to Mt. Sinai. That angel didn't give him food and drink at Beer-Sheba on his own; Yahweh sent him. No wonder the powers that be who pick out our liturgical readings never give us this whole story at one time. If they did, most homilists wouldn't know what to do with it.

The theology conveyed by the sacred author in this passage is more than disturbing. Besides being expected to follow a God who's compassionate and forgiving, we're asked to follow a God who, at times, actually helps us travel in the wrong direction in life. Once we hear this whole pericope, nothing could be clearer.

Applying Elijah's misdirection to our own lives will take us far beyond geography. How about all the wrong psychological directions we've taken in our lifetime? The wrong relationships we've formed? Most of the time we didn't think we'd gone astray. We presumed we were where God wanted us to be.

It's important to note the gospel Jesus begins his ministry by demanding his followers go through a "metanoia" in their lives; that they change their basic value systems, that they change their directions. Considering their repentance is an outward sign they've become other Christs, is it possible the historical Jesus also had to change the direction of his life?

Doesn't it bother you that Jesus waited for at least 30 years to begin his public ministry? As God, why didn't he start the ball rolling in Bethlehem? What took him so long? If he hadn't somehow changed over the years, why were his fellow townsfolk so surprised by his behavior in Mark 6 or his family think he was crazy in Mark 3?

No wonder metanoia is the heart of Christianity. Jesus isn't asking us to do anything he hasn't done.

COPYRIGHT 2018 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN

AUGUST 19TH, 2018: TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

It's important to understand that different biblical authors not only disagree with one another, sometimes they actually debate the contradictory characteristics of their various theologies. This is certainly the case with Scripture's well-known "wisdom debate." On one side we often have the author of Proverbs; on the other, the author of Job.

Biblical wisdom is usually defined as the knack of surfacing the predictability of God's actions. In other words, if I, or God, do such and such we can count on God following up with a logical specific action. He/she always maintains the same patterns. We can put our money on it. Our task is simply to surface which actions cause these predictable divine actions. For instance, if I find out what Yahweh's laws are, and faithfully work at carrying them out, Yahweh will always give me everything I need, especially a long, meaningful life. On the other hand, should I ignore those specific rules and regulations, I (and/or my descendants) are certain to live miserably and die young.

But on the other side of the picture are books like Job. No matter how well this just man adheres to God's laws, he always gets the dirty end of the stick. Everything goes against him. He and his family are constantly punished. There's no predictability in God's actions. Even when Yahweh eventually appears to him, his questions are never answered. God just haughtily says, "I'm divine and you're not. You'll never understand why I do what I do. So stop worrying about it."

Obviously today's three readings come down on the Proverbs side of the debate. The sacred author paints a symbolic picture of wisdom as a terrific banquet, providing food and drink that takes care of our thirst and hunger for a lifetime. John puts some of the same wisdom elements in the mouth of his Jesus when he speaks about the Eucharist. But he significantly takes the effects of that food and drink beyond this life into eternity. Even the Pauline disciple responsible for Ephesians seems to assure his readers if they revolve their lives around doing the will of the Christ things are guaranteed to go well with them for the rest of their lives. Most of us build our lives on these assurances.

But in spite of this confidence, lots of believing people still bought Rabbi Kushner's bestselling 1981 book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. No matter how much they trusted in their Proverbs theology, they also kept hearing Job's complaints. Their faith wasn't simply a matter of black and white.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons the earliest biblical Eucharistic theology wasn't John's but Paul's. The Apostle didn't hammer away at Jesus' presence in the sacramental bread and wine; he constantly stressed his/her presence in those around us. Such an emphasis is much more "touchy" than just surfacing the risen Jesus in a piece of bread and a sip of wine. I presume there are people comprising Paul's Body of Christ with whom we don't agree, or individuals who've hurt us. The second half of I Corinthians 11 revolves around those unexpected situations and unpredictable people. Considering our biblical authors wrote because of problems in their communities, Paul had a field day.

It's rather simple and easy to go to church and receive the body and blood of Christ. Except for believing in "transubstantiation," there are few problems. It's another thing to actually be church and experience the body and blood of Christ all around us. No wonder Paul's theology eventually fell by the way.

Perhaps one of our life's task should be to keep debating with those who follow John's Eucharistic theology. It's the biblical thing to do.

COPYRIGHT 2018 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN