

7C 2022

Last week, we talked about how God guides us step by step as we go forward in trust, not knowing where the path will lead ultimately.

The reading from 1 Kings is a perfect example of this.

In this story, we see that even the prophet Elijah was unable to hear for a time where God was directing him.

He learns to accept change and uncertainty as an integral part of God's plan.

Our ability to accept change and uncertainty is key to our own spiritual growth.

Otherwise, we dwell in denial of reality, and humans are masters of denial.

We recognize on this Juneteenth, for example, when we celebrate the end of slavery, to what extent people can blind themselves to things, even to others' humanity.

People can look at a human being and say that she is not a human being.

People can look at a privately owned forced labor camp and call it a plantation.

As I told you before, Jung said that "People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own soul."

He added, "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious."

We start to grow, in other words, when we bring to light what we tend to ignore, when we accept what *is* because what we do not acknowledge, well, that gets projected onto others whom we then hate and abuse, deny and reject.

We make our way most efficiently amid the changes and chances of this life by looking at ourselves honestly and accepting the fact that we are not always able to hear God's voice.

Elijah's story is illustrative and ultimately inspiring.

It begins with a dramatic competition between the many prophets of Baal and the last remaining prophet of Jehovah, Elijah.

He is the only one who has not been assassinated.

The Baal prophets put on a great show, but they lack the integrity of those who acknowledge reality.

They are more concerned with pleasing those in power in order to preserve their status.

In front of witnesses, the priests of Baal try to get their god to set fire to an offering on their altar.

When they fail, Elijah rebuilds the altar of the God of truth and integrity, piles on wood and a sacrifice, and then, like any great drama queen, pours water over the whole thing three times for effect.

Elijah then requests that God set ablaze the damp pile.

After fire falls and consumes the sacrifice, the crowd is swayed.

(It was the water that did it.)

Elijah seizes the momentum and kills 450 of Baal's prophets.

When Jezebel, the Phoenician wife of King Ahab, hears about the prophet smackdown, she is angry and threatens Elijah with retribution.

At this point, Elijah cannot hear God's voice because of his frustration and fear.

He flees into the wilderness, where he falls asleep under a broom tree, dejected and ready to die of exposure and dehydration.

It seems the only way he could ever escape death was through God's intervention, so his running away was a bit hysterical, which is in keeping with his character.

An angel wakes him up under the broom tree, provides him with some water and a cake baked on a hot stone, and tells him to eat.

Elijah obeys the instructions, but still has no idea what God has in mind.

Eating, it would seem, will merely prolong the inevitable, so he returns to sleep.

Again, the angel awakens him, provides more food and water, and tells him to eat and drink.

A second time, Elijah obeys.

God seems to know that Elijah has not finished wandering, that he is not ready to listen, and gives him enough nourishment to get him to the point where he can.

Elijah must have been surprised that the holy pancakes provided him with enough strength for a forty-day journey.

Once he arrives at Horeb, God asks Elijah what he is doing there.

Elijah seems to misunderstand and simply explains why he is fleeing from Jezebel.

God already knows this and is asking him to reflect on his actions.

God decides to try something else.

He tells Elijah to go out of the cave and stand on the mountain because God is about to
pass.

This time, Elijah waits for God rather than rushing headlong.

First, there is a great wind, and then an earthquake, and then a fire, but Elijah knows that
God is not in any of these.

God infrequently manifests in bombastic ways.

God is the God of love, not coercion.

Most of the time, God is subtle.

After all these dramatic events, there is the sound of sheer silence, or more accurately
translated, a *silent voice*.

God is reminding Elijah to filter out the noise and listen patiently.

Elijah recognizes God in the silent voice and, as instructed, goes out to stand on the
mountain.

God asks him *again* what he is doing there.

Elijah initially offers the same explanation, but God’s quiet, persistent, questioning voice leads Elijah to realize that he is not where he should be.

Elijah at last begins to listen to the quiet voice, which tells him to “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.”

There, Elijah is to anoint two kings and a successor for himself.

The plan is now more clear to Elijah—God will make sure that those who support Jezebel are killed—but Elijah had to do some wandering before he was ready to listen.

What does the story of Elijah teach us?

God is the God of integrity and truth, no matter what we call God.

The Baal prophets were not rejected by God because they worshipped God under the wrong name, but because they lacked integrity.

They were not seekers of truth.

God insists that *we* face reality.

This means that we must accept several truths.

First, we must accept the truth of change as the only constant in order that we may grow spiritually.

As one comedian observed about people who say, “This is a photo of me when I was younger,” every photo is of us when we were younger.

God never promised to protect us from change.

Elijah would have been much more comfortable making his peace with the status quo and not challenging the Baal prophets, but that did not serve God's plan of truth and integrity.

Also, in order to accept reality, we first must accept our own truth, the truth of our own light *and* darkness.

We must bring our darkness to the light or we will project it outward onto others as anger and hatred.

In addition, we may not hear God when we want.

Sometimes, we are not ready to listen.

Sometimes, God is not ready to speak.

We must prepare ourselves to listen, and wait.

The more we struggle against truth, against reality, the more we turn from God and blind ourselves to those moments when God is speaking to us in a silent voice.

Finally, even the great prophet Elijah ran away hysterically when he could not hear God's plan through the noise of his mind, so we should be very gentle with ourselves when we cannot hear God's silent voice.