

## From Discouragement to Hope

August 26, 2012

Scripture readings:

1 Kings 19: 1-4, 13b-18; Isaiah 7: 14; 2 Timothy 4: 14-18 (RSV)

Our first scripture for today is taken from the First Book of Kings, Chapter 19. We are reading from the story of the prophet Elijah. You recall that after King Solomon, the Kingdom of Israel split. The northern half seceded and called itself the Kingdom of Israel. The remnant was the Kingdom of Judah. Elijah is sent as a prophet to Ahab, King of Israel. Elijah demonstrates the true power of God in a showdown on Mount Carmel. The four hundred prophets of Baal cry to their god. Elijah prays to the Lord. Elijah's prayer is answered by fire that consumes the offering. Surely there could be no doubt who God is after that demonstration! Elijah slays the prophets of Baal. Then he and Ahab return to Jezebel amid a miraculous downpour that ends the drought.

1 Kings 19:

1. Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had slain all the prophets [that is, prophets of Baal] with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." 3 Then he was afraid, and he arose and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. 4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree; and he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, Lord, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers."

Continuing later, at Mount Horeb,

13b And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 14 He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

15 And the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria; 16 And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel; and Elisha son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. 17 And him who escapes from the sword of Hazael Jehu will slay; and him who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay. 18 Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."  
(RSV)

A second reading from scripture comes from the prophet Isaiah, speaking to King Ahaz of the Kingdom of Judah, when Jerusalem is threatened with attack:

Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Our third scripture comes from the New Testament, from the Apostle Paul, who is on trial in Rome. Here he writes to Timothy, in the second letter, Chapter 4:

2 Timothy 4: 16 At my first defense no one took my part; all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! 17 But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the message fully, that all the gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will

rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Discouragement. Here we see both Elijah and Paul both faced with discouragement in their different situations. Let's look at Elijah first. Elijah had great hopes that King Ahab would heed the Lord's word, and reform. Surely God had great hopes for Ahab. Why else send a prophet, a message, to a King if he was beyond hope of reform?

Ahab's Caananite queen, Jezebel, has established the worship of Baal. That seems to be popular with the people. She's getting rid of followers of the Lord. Things are headed in the wrong direction. Israel needs a leader to turn things around. Someone like King Ahab.

At Mount Carmel, God sends fire miraculously from heaven to burn the offering, followed by a fierce thunderstorm. The storm ends a three year famine that the Lord had sent through an earlier prophesy. Elijah hopes that this demonstration of God's great power will convince Ahab. Surely Ahab will reform now! Alas, it is not to be. Jezebel sends Elijah a message. She is going to have him killed very shortly. Elijah flees. He runs all the way beyond Judah, into the wilderness. He ultimately flees all the way to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, where Moses received the Ten Commandments.

Listen to Elijah's cry: "It is enough; now, Lord, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers." Elijah is defeated. His life's work is a ruin. He has lost Ahab, God's King of Israel. He later explains to God, "For the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." It's not just about Ahab. As Elijah sees it, God's purpose has been defeated. What is there left? This is discouragement. Maybe even despair. Elijah sees no future, no purpose, and no hope.

God answers Elijah. He gives him some tasks. He is to anoint the future kings of Syria and Israel. He is also to anoint his own replacement as a prophet. There will indeed be terrible things ahead. God tells Elijah that he is not alone. There are seven thousand who have not worshiped Baal. God will save them. God's purpose may not be visible to Elijah, but God is not defeated. Elijah just does not have the perspective to understand. Disaster indeed looms for the Northern Kingdom of Israel. But that won't be the end.

We too are vulnerable to this kind of discouragement. You follow the news, right? There is no shortage of disasters. Threats that the future will be worse. We have no trouble making a list. The economy: not just the U.S., but for the whole world. The rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Disease threatens. Antibiotics are losing their effectiveness. There's global warming. Warnings of environmental disasters. Nuclear weapons still loom. Terrorists are closer to getting them. I expect you can extend this list considerably with trends in politics, education, business, morality, and culture. How can we not be discouraged? As has been said for many years, the world seems to be "Going to Hell". Or as our parents or grandparents might have said, "going to Hell in a handbasket." (Why a handbasket? I never could quite figure that out.)

While Elijah cannot see God's purpose, another prophet over 100 years later brings from God a message of hope in the midst of similar discouragement. Isaiah is a prophet to the much smaller and weaker Kingdom of Judah. Jerusalem is the capitol, and where the Temple is. The King of Israel, that is, the Northern kingdom, and the King of Syria, have become allies. Their purpose is to capture Jerusalem. We read in Isaiah, Chapter 7,

2 When the House of David [that is, the royal heir of David, King Ahaz] was told, “Syria is in league with Ephraim,” [meaning Israel] his heart and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

Isaiah delivers a message of hope from God. We pick up the story in verse 14,

14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. 15 He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.”

Isaiah is telling this fearful King Ahaz that this baby being born will prosper. Before he is old enough to tell good from evil, about age 12, Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel will be no more. Indeed, this prophesy is fulfilled. For the Kingdom of Judah, this baby, this small child, is a sign. God continues with them. Not a lightning bolt from heaven. Not a miraculous thunderstorm ending a famine. Those were unconvincing, as Elijah found out. But a child.

There are also other places in the scriptures where a child is the sign of what God is doing. For example, concerning this very same prophesy, a son is born to Isaiah’s wife, and Isaiah is instructed to name him “Mahershalalhashbaz”, a literal prophesy of the doom approaching for Jerusalem’s enemies. How would you like that for your name: “Mahershalalhashbaz”?

Paul’s story is a bit different. Not only are things going the wrong way politically, but Paul himself is in very serious trouble. The Jews have rejected the gospel. Other teachers have been going about teaching a different gospel that contradicts the message Jesus has given Paul. Rome was initially neutral on the issue of this new Christian religion. But the Roman rulers are about to turn against the Church with a vengeance. Paul is on trial for his life in Rome. That’s not going well either. He has apparently just had a hearing. He writes to Timothy, “At my first defense no one took my part; all deserted me.”

Personal discouragement. Sometimes that is even harder to deal with than our worry for the world. Forget the global stuff. It’s not difficult to find ourselves facing discouragement in the very personal problems we face in our lives.

But Paul has the benefit of living in the light of that Child, The Child. For we Christians hear in the scriptures from Isaiah words of prophesy that go beyond the international relations problems of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. We understand the prophesy to speak of a Child born to a virgin, to Mary. Luke reports the words of the angel to this young woman in Chapter 1 of his gospel,

Luke 1, 26: In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, “Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” 29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the lord God will give him the throne of his father David.

33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

When Paul speaks to Timothy, he does so from his perspective of knowing that Child, the grown, sacrificed, and risen Jesus, the God with us, Immanuel. Paul knows that God has a future for him. He concludes his message to Timothy with these words, “The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever.”

Now, there is quite a difference between the concerns of the prophets Elijah and Isaiah, and that of Paul. Paul is expecting the second coming of Jesus at any time. He is concerned with personal salvation, the gospel of salvation he seeks to bring to all of the Gentiles. In his focus on that, Paul doesn't think much about the future here on Earth; he expects it will be short. Paul focuses on God's salvation for His individual people. Paul misses what God is doing over the longer course of history, that is, what is yet to come here on Earth.

The fact is, God is doing both. He cares about us individually, and he cares for the world. The prophets received messages from God, and showed signs that God is acting in history. He cares about His people, and the future. Isaiah identifies a baby, a child, as the sign. Paul is blessed, and blesses us, with a message for the world. The child, the baby born to Mary, Jesus, made God's saving love manifest to each one of us.

So, what of us today? We see the news and looming problems of the world. We struggle against our own infirmities and mortality. What sign do we have? We have the gospel: the message brought to us through the scriptures. We have the witnesses who have gone before us and whose lives we have seen lived out. We have the promise in scripture that we will eventually be gathered to God to be with him as His children forever.

But, what of the world? Is there a sign that things are not just headed toward doom and destruction? For that, let us return to the sign Isaiah gives us. He points to a child. A child who will grow up and learn right from wrong, and will prosper. That child is the future, that child and others like him. Children through whom God will bless the future. The Kingdom of Judah, the House of David, and the people who will eventually be known as the Jews, will survive, and they will thrive. And they will see fulfilled the promise made to Abraham, to be a blessing to all the families of the Earth.

Can we see that sign today? I believe we can. In children. Set aside what you see in the news for the moment. People are still getting married, and making the commitment to the future of having children. Children are still being born and raised. Those children are a blessing to the future.

It is my special privilege to see those children as they make the transition from being dependents, still somewhat children, to adults. I teach at Wilkes University. I see these young men and women enter the University as freshmen. I watch as they make the transition over four years to purposeful, useful adulthood. I will tell you this: Things are getting better. The students I have been seeing are not only talented, but they are willing to work hard, they are motivated, they care for each other and for others. And they are good people, and considerate. That child, those children, they are our sign. If we look, we can see God's sign, his blessing of the future, happening. The world will always have its problems, but God continues with us, as these children grow up and are blessings. The World is becoming a better place.

Paul tells the Corinthians, in his second letter, Chapter 4,

16 So do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. 17 For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 because we look not to things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (RSV)

He also tells the Romans in his letter to that church, Chapter 8:

Romans 8, 38: For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (KJV)

Isaiah, in his vision of the future, says in Chapter 11,

Isaiah 11:6 The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,  
And the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
And the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
And a little child shall lead them. (RSV)

So, do not be discouraged. There will always be problems looming. Just as in Elijah's day, as in Isaiah's day, and as in Paul's day. We may, or we may not, be able to discern God's plan. But we can see signs of his promise. Look for a child. In that child you can see God's promise that there will continue to be those through whom the future will be blessed. Do your best to reinforce that blessing as parents, as caring relatives, as educators, or in whatever other role you may find the opportunity.

Know that we are assured of God's ultimate purposes: that all the world may be blessed, and ultimately to gather us to himself.

Amen.