

Sermon August 9, 2020  
“Called into Community and Hope”  
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Grace and Peace to You in the name of God Our Loving Creator and Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

If there was a greatest hits album of Bible quotes that get used in popular culture, our text from Romans is chalk full of them.

“The Lord is near to you. On your lips and in your hearts.”

“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

It's a text that often points people toward an individual confession and conversion experience which is not the full intention of this Scripture. Right now we are all in the middle of a time that is exploring the boundaries between the personal faith experience and the communal church experience. There is value in the personal relationship to Jesus at the heart of our faith but faith is intended to be lived out in and through community.

So often Christianity is presented as an individual and personal experience and the text from Romans is one of the pieces of Scripture that can be used to reinforce that idea. This is the Jesus Prayer that American evangelical and fundamentalist people can see as a way to rack up converts. Getting people to say the Jesus prayer can become a tangible goal of evangelism, and lead individuals to think about how many other individuals they got to convert or say the Jesus prayer, rather than follow up with the communal support and

faith experience that is intended. Today, because of social distancing and challenges of worshipping together, people can become more reliant on the individual experience through prayer and connecting with God individually.

While this Jesus prayer texts and our other texts today are stories that seem on the surface to be about the individual faith experience, but each actually is a reassurance and invitation to see the gift and abundance of community as the intention of the faith experience. God is the one who is faithful and creating faith in us! And I would argue a communal experience that we can still find and grow through even during a pandemic!

At Bible study, on Tuesday mornings we have a communal experience exploring Scripture and growing closer to our God and each other through conversation. Our Old Testament Lesson this week is about the Prophet Elijah and in Bible Study this week we talked about the call of Elijah. During a famine he is told to go deep into Gentile/non-Jewish territory North of Israel and find a widow and her son. All the characters are close to death, but God brought them new life through supplies for simple bread that kept them alive and also formed a community, almost family for a time to support each other. Elijah was a stranger to the land and this people, and someone who may have been seen as an enemy to the people, who's queen Jezebel had married the king of Israel and was promoting the worship of another God among the Jewish people. But however unlikely this is where Elijah found hospitality and community. At Bible Study we talked about trips that had been taken to Africa and Central America and how people in other cultures often understand things communally where we in the United States are often presented with a gospel that is more focused on the individual faith experience.

The Prophet Elijah has this experience with the widow and her son and then moves into his public ministry and God supports him in a challenge to all of Jezebel's prophets at Mount Carmel where he triumphs and reveals Yahweh's power. But then we get this story from our text today where Elijah finds himself alone, disappointed in God and the state of the world, and depressed. I'm sure none of us have had those feelings in the past few months have we?

Elijah should be at a peak but finds himself downtrodden. Jezebel has threatened his life in response for defeating her prophets and so Elijah flees. He finds himself under a broom tree, wondering what life is really worth at this point and asks God to take his life. But God provides him with food for a 40 day journey. He has criss-crossed across the whole region following God's call but then he finds himself outside of the promised land again this time, in the South where he goes to Mount Horeb. Now Mount Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai where Moses received the commandments where the Israelites lived in the Wilderness. Where they chose to follow Yahweh and where they rebelled and drove Moses crazy.

Elijah's ideals may have been to restore Israel to its former glory as he goes back to where it all began, where the law was given, because it was needed! Maybe in a way, Elijah being in this cave is an attempt to crawl back into the womb of Judaism, and the comfort of the good old days. He is deep in self-pity as well as the cave, believing he is the only faithful person left! But God calls him out and says, "What are you doing here Elijah?". Yahweh wants Elijah to see the view from Mount Horeb and he gets a reminder that the relationship between God and God's people has always been complicated and difficult, but God is faithful even when people stray. He is told to go take in the view but it's not clear whether he actually leaves the safety of his cave and his sad feelings.

But he is told to look for God and he may expect the God who showed up in burning bushes, plagues, parting of the Red Sea, and lightning and smoke. As Elijah watches a strong wind passes by, and then an earthquake and then a fire, but God was not in any of these big dramatic experiences. Instead after all that was done, Elijah experienced the sound of "sheer silence" and this is what makes him take up the prophet's mantle and wrap it around his face. He gets up and stands at the caves entrance and takes in the view. Maybe Elijah forgot about how God showed up in the manna that got him there, and in the widow's manna, in the daily bread he received. Maybe he forgot that most days in the wilderness were probably extremely ordinary and boring.

He still feels alone, and sad about the state of the world, but God tells him that he is not alone. A prophets work can be lonely, so Yahweh lets Elijah know there is a community that is faithful and Yahweh tells Elijah that that is his prophet's mantle is too heavy, another will take up his work. These are promises of hope and they are promises of community. Even if Elijah can't be with the community, even if he feels alone, God gives a word of hope that Elijah is not alone.

I see our gospel today as being another story that reminds us of community. We can sometimes glorify Peter walking toward Jesus on the water in the storm as an individual act of faith. When he sinks, commentators can see that as a weakness of individual faith and a call for us to be more faithful than Peter. But perhaps it is also a reminder of the reality that when we make faith an individual experience we sink. It's not about us, we need Jesus and Jesus gives us a community to experience life with and to deliver hope to each other.

And we remember that Jesus was out on his own. He had been with crowds and disciples, and he needed a break to rest and pray. But maybe the other message of this story is not just that Peter needed help and needed community. Jesus did too. He came back. He could have stayed on his own. Do you think Jesus ever had reason to be disappointed like Elijah? In the state of the world. In people not hearing him. In his disciples never quite understanding. Definitely. But Jesus comes back to them. And I believe that is because Jesus wants to be near them. Jesus is also drawn into community as messy as that may be at times.

And so we, who may feel isolated and scared with all we are facing at this time, are called as these characters in the Bible were, back to God and back to community, even if we can't see it the way we normally do and experience it like we are used to. Even if we are as disappointed as Elijah at times. God is with us and we are not alone. Jesus loves you and will not let you sink. It's okay to ask for help and we can still support one another and be Christ's hands and feet in this world, through a card, a phone call, a gift, a service. And in the way we gather and remember all the gifts of a loving God who beckons us to not stay in the cave forever, but to get up and take in the view of quiet gratitude and resurrection hope.

May the peace that passes all understanding keep your heart and mind in Christ Jesus our Lord.