



SUNDAY SERMON

What Are You Doing Here?

Welcome back to an ordinary Sunday at St. Columba's. The church calendar refers to this period between Pentecost and Advent as "ordinary time" -- sometimes called "the green season"—marking the longest series of Sundays when there are no special observances commemorating our life in Christ. The term "ordinary" does not mean "mundane." No hour devoted to celebrating our life with God could ever be ordinary in that sense.

After our last few Sundays together, perhaps a return to the "ordinary" will come as a relief. We've celebrated Pentecost in a rousing service as Bishop Mariann confirmed and received 33 youth and adults into the church. We gave thanks for the life of Saint Columba of Iona, and gathered for two festive brunches. Last Sunday we commissioned the members of SCAP, the St. Columba's Appalachia Project, as they head to West Virginia.

And we bid goodbye to a beloved friend and leader, Pattie Ames, our Director of Children's Ministry for 22 years. Pattie helped to make this a truly intergenerational faith community where all can know and share the love of Jesus.

We showed our affection and gratitude in an observance so big that a new term had to be coined in our event-planning vocabulary. We called this celebration a palooza—a Pattie Palooza! I came across a definition of palooza—it's "the art of throwing a very extravagant party with a plethora of friends" with the honoree's name in a prefix. Ours was an extravagant party indeed.

We also had prayers, words of tribute, a special anthem, and one of the longest, warmest and most fervent ovations ever to ring in this room. We cheered not only for what Pattie has meant to St. Columba's but for what St. Columba's has come to mean to us. Pattie's ministry reminds us that being part of a community of people who bear the image of God is both a blessing and a calling for us to reveal the light of God in dark places.

To proclaim that truth is to engage in prophetic witness. I expect Patty would scoff at the mentioning of her name in the same sentence as the great prophets of our faith such as Elijah. Yet standing up for the love and justice of God-- in a culture that can be indifferent or hostile to those values-- is part of the prophetic work a faith community is called to do. Along with many of you, Pattie has helped us to engage in that work, and in response last Sunday we said a resounding "job well done."

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But no one is saying “job well done” to Elijah in today’s reading. This courageous and consequential prophet is second only to Moses as a revered figure of Hebrew scripture. Elijah’s name means “my God is Yahweh”—the God of Israel. His mission is to preserve Israel’s covenant bond with the one God and steer the faithful away from the worship of idols.

But like most of ancient Israel’s dysfunctional rulers, King Ahab is more interested in consolidating his power than in advancing the purposes of God. He marries a foreign princess, Jezebel, and allows the worship of rival deities thought to be superior to Israel’s God. And so God sends a drought that parches the land for three years.

It is dangerous for prophets to speak truth to power, and when Elijah condemns idol worship, Ahab names him “troubler of Israel” (1 Kings 18: 17). A violent conflict ensues in which God’s army of one—Elijah—defeats Jezebel’s army of 450. The power of Israel’s God is proven, and God sends rain. Scholars see this story as a “folk legend” not meant to represent an accurate history. Still, while much of Elijah’s story may seem hard to relate to our experience, what happens next is worthy of our reflection as we strive to live as God’s people today.

It is hard to imagine a more victorious moment. The drought is over. The corrupt royal family has been rebuked. Elijah has demonstrated the greatness of God and helped to restore God’s relationship with Israel. We would expect Elijah to be basking in the glory of his triumph.

But Jezebel in fury has vowed to have Elijah killed. And we meet him now at his lowest point. No one is about to hold an “Elijah Palooza” in his honor. Indeed, he flees for his life, into the wilderness. After a frantic day on the run, he eludes his pursuers but collapses in fatigue and deep despondency, ready to end his ministry and even his life. Despite the evidence of Elijah’s success, he feels only bleakness and a sense of futility. He lies down under a tree, immobilized.

We might recognize in Elijah signs of depression or at least severe burnout. He can’t escape from this grip of despair on his own. So God sends a messenger offering two things Elijah needs to survive—food and tender encouragement. “Get up and eat,” the angel says, “otherwise the journey will be too much for you” (19: 7). Elijah’s journey is to Horeb, the mountain of God, also known as Mount Sinai. But the story speaks to all our journeys of discernment when we or the people we love face times of doubt, loss, or crisis, or times of new opportunity and change.

After spending the night in a cave, Elijah is met by God with a question whose directness might make us uneasy: “what are you doing here, Elijah?” (19: 9). Perhaps God wants Elijah to look beyond his current dilemma to recall the origins of his mission and to imagine how he might serve God in the future. But Elijah is still overwhelmed with distress, and he replies: “I have been very zealous for the Lord...for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant...and killed your prophets...I alone am left, and they are seeking my life...”(19:10).

Elijah needs God’s consolation, and waits for guidance in a sign from nature, the way God spoke to Moses. But a great wind, an earthquake and a fire come and go with no signal from God. Only a “sound of sheer silence” (19: 12) seems to reveal God’s presence to Elijah. They go back and forth again, as God repeats the question: “What are you doing here?” (19:13) and Elijah repeats his answer. While it’s not clear that they understand one another yet, God is present in a process of discernment that will eventually bring Elijah reassurance and relief.

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God doesn't chastise Elijah for his pessimism, but directs him to go back the way he came and resume his ministry. God has plans for Elijah. In later verses, God assures him that he is far from alone, that 7,000 others are also "zealous for the Lord" and that a new prophet, Elisha, will be his successor. There is still much to do, but Elijah won't be doing it alone.

I've never spent the night in a cave, but, like many of you, I've experienced setbacks and losses that have made me doubt my self-worth and question whether my path is the right one. And, like many of you, I've known times of opportunity--forks in the road that have tested my capacity for change. I'm blessed to have a prayer life that can be a sacred space in which to share my joys and woes and seek strength and renewal in God.

But God does not very often open our conversation with the question he asks Elijah: "What are you doing here, David?" It's not a question I'd be anxious to answer on a daily basis, but in a time of discernment I've learned it can be a necessary one. It asks us to search ourselves and to reflect on the purposes for which God has formed us and how we can best fulfill them. While my answer never comes swiftly, the question hovers helpfully over a sometimes long and deliberate process of discerning how I can best live fully in God and fully in the world.

Discernment is highlighted as one of the ways we "practice life with Christ" here at St. Columba's. Our website describes discernment as a "practice of awareness that helps us to develop listening hearts and to learn to walk with God, discovering ourselves in the process." Cultivating this awareness is as challenging for us as it is for Elijah. He expects a message from God to be announced in the stirrings of nature he can see, hear and feel outside himself. But it is in the "sound of sheer silence" that he begins to discern God's activity in his life.

That's a reminder to me that time devoted to being with God can prepare us for the time we'll devote to doing for God. As the preacher Peter Gomes has suggested, perhaps one of the reasons Elijah suffers from burnout is that his work for God becomes disconnected from his life with God. The work becomes all about him rather than the One who sent him forth. Only in the silence can Elijah rediscover the loving presence of the God whom he serves.

We need to be intentional in making time to just be, and to be with God, through prayer or meditation, walking in nature, going on retreat, or in whatever quiet space we can find, including here with fellow Columbans.

The agenda for prophetic witness that needs attention outside our doors is a long and challenging one. This congregation embraces that work with great energy and compassion. Like Elijah, we are "very zealous for the Lord" in making God's love and justice known in our world. Let us also know it in our hearts.

Like Elijah, we will have gratifying successes and discouraging setbacks. And whether or not a palooza is ever thrown in our honor, we must never be in doubt that God is zealous for each one of us.

Amen.