

"Beside the Brook Cherith"

1 Kings 17:1-7

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Last week, I introduced to you the story's TWO GREAT PROTAGONISTS- ELIJAH, Israel's GREATEST PROPHET, and AHAB, Israel's MOST DIABOLICAL KING. Well this morning, they are now introduced to EACH OTHER when Elijah travels to Samaria—to Ahab's famous ivory palace--and confronts him with a terrifying prophecy. He tells him "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years except by my word." Thus, Elijah not only challenges AHAB AND HIS LEADERSHIP, it is an outright attack on the POWER OF BAAL- Baal being the pagan god worshiped by the Canaanites. Baal was sometimes called "the storm god"- the one they depended on to bring the rains that replenished their crops and multiplied their flocks. For a small agricultural country like Israel, an extended drought would decimate that nation. By challenging Baal to produce rain, Elijah would prove once and for all that it was no more than a false god, a powerless idol.

Subsequently, we are told in v. 2 that the word of the Lord came to Elijah and instructed him to flee the region by heading east to a place called Cherith and there, beside a brook, he would hide out. By challenging Ahab in this manner, the king is now angry and he won't hesitate to imprison him if he can find him. However, beside the brook Cherith, Elijah would remain safe; God would see to it that in the face of that terrible drought, he would be provided for. There, he would find water to drink and food to eat- sustained by ravens which God would send to minister to him. In the face of all the privation Israel would experience, God promised to support Elijah throughout its duration. His meals might not seem sumptuous, but at least he would be alive.

Thus our scripture lesson reminds us that God WILL take care of his servants, that as God provided manna in the wilderness for his people, and as he provided sustenance for his servant Elijah during his country's worst drought, so will this same God also protect and preserve US when our OWN resources have dried up and WE are in need. Jesus understood this and for this reason, he could assure his followers: "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" Similarly, the Apostle Paul could state, "My God shall provide all your needs according to his riches in glory." Contrary to those popular TV preachers who promise all kinds of material prosperity for those who support their ministry, God never promises us luxuries- only that he will SUSTAIN US IN OUR HOUR OF NEED with what it is we DO need: he will supply us with only the ESSENTIALS required to live and to perform his work and that's all that God EVER promises!

But the sanctuary Elijah finds beside the brook Cherith was far more than a place to find safety and sustenance- more IMPORTANTLY, it provided him with a period of PREPARATION AND TRAINING FOR HIS MISSION TO ISRAEL. He was now in God's

“SCHOOL OF OBEDIENCE,” and if ANYONE needed such lessons for obedience, it was ELIJAH- a man of STRONG WILL, POWERFUL PASSION and TREMENDOUS PRIDE. Before God would be able to use him, his WILL would have to be BROUGHT UNDER CONTROL, his PASSION TAMED, and his PRIDE HUMBLLED. Therefore, THIS was the purpose for his sojourn beside the brook Cherith- it was to be a period of discipline, a time of great mental, emotional and spiritual development WITHOUT which he could NEVER be able to effectively serve as God's mouthpiece and thus save God's people.

To begin with, the brook Cherith was not exactly a seaside resort- it was not a river to swim in or a place to fish for trout. The name "Cherith" literally means "the cutting place"; it is a place where a small flow of water had worn away the rock and stone to form a small culvert in the desert. In the midst of that drought, the brook Cherith had become little more than a trickle, a filthy little flow of foul water. It was THERE the prophet would find JUST ENOUGH to DRINK and CLEAN HIMSELF WITH until God had OTHER orders for him.

Meanwhile, the birds that would feed him were none other than HUGE BLACK RAVENS. Throughout history, ravens have been regarded as an omen of misfortune, tragedy, and even death- just think of Edgar Allen Poe's famous poem "The Raven." To the Hebrews, ravens were regarded as UNCLEAN because they were carrion eaters. They consumed the scraps of rotten waste and discarded food flung outside the village walls, picking at the putrefying flesh that remained on carcasses that the other animals didn't get first- in other words, they lived off of whatever road kill they could find. And so Elijah—God's chosen and beloved representative--was kept alive, not on enormous portions of meat and vegetables along with a helping of apple pie as we might suppose, NO! Instead, he would be fed—morning, noon, and night--with the decaying flesh of dead animals and then wash it all down, not with the finest beers and ales brewed in all of Israel, but with dirty, rancid water- THIS became Elijah's food and drink, THIS is what God would provide his prophet in order to sustain him throughout Israel's terrible drought.

And yet, that year beside the brook Cherith would serve as God's classroom where the prophet would learn his most IMPORTANT LESSONS ON FAITH- he would be forced to trust God IMPLICITLY if he was to survive. While the rest of Israel suffered extreme scarcity, waiting in vain for Baal and Ashteroth to come to their aid, Elijah would receive his daily portion of food. It was certainly no feast but it was ENOUGH. Only by listening to God's word was there any hope of survival, only THEN could he become obedient to God in all things, only THEN would he be able to boldly confront the wickedness of Ahab and Jezebel and save God's people from certain destruction.

As we can see, it's not easy being a loyal servant of God. For Elijah, Cherith will become THE MOST IMPORTANT PERIOD in his life. If he could withstand the loneliness, the revulsion, the humiliation of that year, he could endure almost ANYTHING. In the fierce furnace of affliction, his faith in God would be refined. If he was faithful enough to obey the voice of God THERE, he would be faithful enough to go ANYWHERE God would send him.

From this, we learn that the FIRST LAW OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP is this- that those whom God loves and desires to use, he must first TRAIN AND SHAPE AND DISCIPLINE. God did choose Elijah because his faith was like Moses and he possessed the

courage of a lion. On the CONTRARY, God first chose an obscure and powerless individual and transformed him INTO a Moses, INTO a person of unbelievable faith and power. God took a rough and solitary figure with no home or family or formal education to speak of and put him through his OWN education to eventually create the kind of person he wanted him to be. Possessing little more than a PASSION FOR JUSTICE for his people and RIGHTEOUSNESS for his God, he used adversity to teach Elijah how to OBEY him, for it was only by being OBEDIENT that Elijah would eventually destroy the house of Omri, end the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, and cast down the gods of Baal and Ashteroth with their temples and their priesthood.

When you study the lives of the great figures in the Bible, you discover that God had worked with each of THEM in the same manner. MOSES had trained for forty years as a shepherd in the desert before he could return to Pharaoh's court and demand "Let my people go!" JOHN THE BAPTIST sojourned in the wilderness for years in preparation for his prophetic role. Following ST. PAUL'S conversion, he traveled to Arabia for fifteen years before he ever preached his first sermon. Luke tells us that JESUS was "led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness" and says afterwards that when that period was completed, he "returned in the POWER of the Spirit into Galilee." Each of these figures had desert experiences, each was hammered and fashioned and honed into their respective callings under the pressures of loneliness, affliction and temptation, leaving one to ask who in their right mind would ever even AGREE to such a hard and demanding mission! But as they would all find out, the same God who had led them INTO that wasteland ALSO faithfully LED THEM OUT and they would never again be the same.

In the same way that God chose them, God ALSO chooses US. Each of US is an obscure and powerless individual gifted with great potential, but unless God chips and hones and smoothes out the rough edges, that potential will NEVER develop; you and I shall always remain very self-willed, deeply passionate and proud persons. We become Christians in the FIRST place, not just to become a better person, but to be AVAILABLE to God and PERFORM his will when we are asked to. Each of us has our OWN mission to perform on his behalf, but unless we are at a place where we can HEAR GOD'S WORD and EXHIBIT A WILLINGNESS TO OBEY IT, we will never be of ANY USE to him. Unless we can sing the words to that well-known gospel song:

*Spirit of the living God, Fall afresh on me.*

*Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.*

*Spirit of the living God, Fall afresh on me”*

and TRULY MEAN it, we may be polite Presbyterians or well-mannered Methodists or respectable Catholics but we'll never be the kind of followers that Christ is REALLY looking for represent his kingdom.

The fact is that each of US has at one time or another in his or her life walked through that desert and found OURSELVES beside our OWN brook Cherith. It is the Old Testament equivalent to the "Garden of Gethsemane"- a time of TESTING, a time of LONELINESS AND CONFUSION, a period of HUMILIATION AND SUFFERING. You may find yourself there RIGHT NOW. However, rather than A PERIOD OF DISCIPLINING AND TRAINING, we regarded it as A TIME OF ABANDONMENT, A TIME when we QUESTIONED God and in

our anger, EVEN SHOOK OUR FISTS at him; some of us may have even DENIED God, at least for a time. Yet, much later, we were able to see that we were never REALLY alone, that God was INDEED present to us with his ravens feeding and sustaining us through that very difficult period. In the fires of our affliction, we in fact found our OWN faith to be strengthened and refined, and we can now say that because of it, we can just about endure ANYTHING that comes our way.

Recently, I found myself reading a book of essays by Martin Luther King entitled *Strength to Love* published in 1963 when the Civil Rights struggle was at its most intense. In the last essay entitled "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," King spoke of the struggles that took place WITHIN HIMSELF as well as WITHOUT. He was open and honest about the sacrifices and personal sufferings that sometimes drove him to despair. And yet, even in those moments, when he sensed his faith abandon him and felt bereft of God's presence and support, he was able to look back AFTERWARDS and see that God's ravens had been present, feeding him the entire time. This is how he expressed it:

*Due to my involvement in the struggle for the freedom on my people, I have known very few quiet days in the last few years. I have been imprisoned in Alabama and Georgia jails twelve times. My home has been bombed twice. A day seldom passes that my family and I are not the recipients of threats of death. I have been the victim of a near-fatal stabbing. So in a real sense I have been battered by the storms of persecution. I must admit that at times I have felt that I could no longer bear such a heavy burden, and have been tempted to retreat to a more quiet and serene life. But every time such a temptation appeared, something came to strengthen my determination. I have learned now that the Master's burden is light precisely when we take his yoke upon us...*

*The agonizing moments through which I have passed during the last few years have also drawn me closer to God. More than ever before, I am convinced of THE REALITY OF A PERSONAL GOD. True, I have always believed in the PERSONALITY of God. But in the past the idea of a PERSONAL GOD was little more than a metaphysical category that I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a LIVING REALITY that has been validated in the experiences of everyday life. God has been PROFOUNDLY REAL to me in recent years. In the midst of lonely days and dreary nights I have heard an inner voice saying, "Lo, I will be with you." When the chains of fear and the manacles of frustration have all but stymied my efforts, I have felt the power of God transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope. I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose, and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship. Behind the harsh appearances of the world there is a benign power...So in the truest sense of the word, God is a LIVING GOD. In him there is feeling and will, responsive to the DEEPEST YEARNING OF THE HUMAN HEART: THIS God both evokes and answers prayer.*

Through his afflictions, AMERICA'S great prophet grew to understand that the brook Cherith is the place at which all true spiritual development begins. It is there where we learn the meaning of TRUE PRAYER, and THROUGH prayer, develop COMPLETE TRUST IN GOD. It is there that we begin OUR JOURNEY TO SELF-DISCOVERY, where we ask who we are and why we're here and bring out our various strengths and weaknesses. King writes in that same essay

that it was through his personal trials he discovered the value of “unmerited suffering,” that as they mounted, he soon realized that there were two ways in which he could respond to them. Either he could react to them with bitterness OR he could seek to transform the suffering into a creative force whereby he might grow spiritually while ALSO helping to heal others facing the SAME ordeal. He learned to do the latter!

The promise WE have this morning is this, that when we find OURSELVES beside the brook Cherith, and we INEVITABLY WILL, it is NEVER for good. Be assured that he who has led us there--our Heavenly Father—ALSO ABIDES with us there. And once there, HE WILL PROVIDE FOR US and SUSTAIN US and, after our time of discipline and preparation is over, he will eventually LEAD US OUT- we have his PROMISE on this. Then WE shall learn, like Moses and Elijah, like Jesus and Martin Luther King before US, the wisdom in lines such as those from James--the brother of our Lord—when he wrote in the opening verses of his epistle: "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing...Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him." Let us pray...

*Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, as you care for the birds of the air and the lilies of the fields, how much MORE do you care for US, your own children. You promise you will NEVER abandon us during such times of want and need. Some of us find ourselves besides that brook Cherith THIS VERY MORNING- a time of testing, a time of loneliness, a time of terrible agony. But it is ALSO a time of grace and mercy. Help us TO SENSE YOUR PRESENCE with us in these moments, to SEE AND APPRECIATE the ravens you send our way to care and sustain us. Teach us those lessons of TRUST and OBEDIENCE which draw us CLOSER to you and make us BETTER DISCIPLES. And when we are LED OUT of there as we EVENTUALLY WILL, help us to see how our faith has been STRENGTHENED and our sympathies and love for those beside that SAME brook have become ENLARGED and DEEPENED as a result. This we ask in Christ's name. Amen.*