

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Second Sunday After Pentecost – Year C

RCL Readings – 1 Kings 19:1-15a; Psalm 42 and 43; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

ACNA Readings – Zechariah 12:8-10, 13:1; Psalm 63; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 9:18-24

RCL Readings

Introduction. This Sunday is the second Sunday after Pentecost and the beginning of Ordinary Time in the liturgical season. It is preceded by Trinity Sunday (the mystery of the Godhead) and ends with Christ the King Sunday (the mystery of the reign of Messiah Jesus). Ordinary Time, therefore, is a season when we are invited to perceive the mystery of God at work in our daily lives, in the ordinary, in the mundane.

Common Theme. Ordinary, everyday life is filled with ups and downs. Good times and bad times. The Bible deals with the realities of life. It does not sugar-coat matters. In our set readings, the prophet Elijah experiences deep despair not long after a career high point, defeating the prophets of Baal and seeing God come through in spectacular fashion. The Psalms pick up on being downcast yet still praising God. The apostle Paul waxes lyrical about being clothed in Christ. The Gospel reading shows Jesus in action, driving back the darkness and shining his light forth. Despair, being downcast, struggling in the darkness, these are ordinary human experiences. The good news throughout the pages of scripture is that God intervenes in the ordinary and is made known in different ways. We can therefore say with the psalmist, “Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.”

1 Kings 19:1-15a. To appreciate the depth of Elijah's crisis, we need to pick up on the backstory. Ahab son of Omri was king of Israel and “did more evil in the eyes of the of Lord than any of those before him” (1 Kgs 16:29). King Ahab was married to Jezebel, whose reputation to this day means her name is like a spiritual swearword. Israel was beset with massive problems, not least a prolonged drought that led to famine. Water sources were scarce and had to be searched out. Added to this, Jezebel was killing off the Lord's prophets and 100 prophets had gone into hiding (1 Kgs 18:4). Yet Elijah is fearless.

Elijah meets King Ahab in person and confronts him with the evil he is doing (1 Kgs 18:18). He challenges the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah, who enjoy the patronage and protection of Jezebel, to a spiritual showdown on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:19). At this mountain-top confrontation, Elijah taunts the prophets and their gods. When his turn comes to offer a sacrifice to the Lord, he is so confident that he drenches the wood and altar with the scarce, perhaps last water supplies that the gathered people of Israel are carrying. This is a high-stakes, all-or-nothing situation, and Elijah is fearless. God comes through in spectacular fashion, consuming the sacrifice and the altar. Elijah is vindicated. The people of Israel fall prostrate and cry “The Lord – he is God!” (1 Kgs 18:39). In this massive confrontation, the score is Elijah: 850 – Jezebel: 0. Yet chapter 19 opens with Elijah running scared for his life.

Charles Spurgeon was moved by this twist in the story of Elijah. In a sermon preached on July 1, 1880, he said:

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When we read the Scriptures in our youth, we are often astonished at the peculiar conditions in which we find even good men. It is difficult for us to understand why David could be in such sore distress, and why such a man as Elijah could be so dreadfully downcast...Elijah failed in the very point at which he was strongest, and that is where most men fail. In Scripture, it is the wisest man who proves himself to be the greatest fool; just as the meekest man, Moses, spoke hasty and bitter words. Abraham failed in his faith, and Job in his patience; so, he who was the most courageous of all men, fled from an angry woman.

Elijah fled and God finds him. God meets Elijah where he is at (sitting under a broom tree) in the condition he is in (wishing to die). God provides for his physical needs (with food and drink) and spiritual needs (literally, a special mountain top encounter). Elijah's despair is so great that when he speaks to God in the sheer silence he has lost perspective of what God has done to restore the faith of the Israelites through the Mount Carmel encounter (blaming them instead) and even complains he is the only prophet left alive (when scripture remains silent about the hundred prophets of the Lord in hiding). God remains faithful even when Elijah is faithless. God sends Elijah back with a fearsome commission and sight into the end game. It is no coincidence that this plays out on Horeb, the mountain of God, the site of Israel's covenant, thus bringing to the fore yet again the centrality of God's covenantal faithfulness.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (of blessed memory) said:

To be sure, when the Israelites received the Torah, there was thunder and lightning and the sound of a shofar. The earth felt as if it were shaking at its foundations. But in a later age, when the prophet Elijah stood at the same mountain after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal, he encountered God not in the whirlwind or the fire or the earthquake but in the *kol demamah dakah*, the still, small voice, literally the sound of a slender silence...From time to time we need to step back from the noise and hubbub of the social world and create in our hearts the stillness of the desert where, within the silence, we can hear the *kol demamah dakah*, the still, small voice of God, telling us we are loved, we are heard, we are embraced by God's everlasting arms, we are not alone.¹

Wise people can do foolish things that cannot be undone. Gentle people can say harsh words in a fit of anger that cause hurt. Courageous people can suddenly find themselves downcast and running scared. Scripture is filled with stories of real people walking with the Lord. Times may change and cultures shift, but characters like Elijah still connect with our humanity today. The good news is that God does not change. God's character is consistent. God's covenantal faithfulness remains steadfast. God is still to be found in the silence telling us we are loved, we are heard, we are embraced by God's everlasting arms; we are not alone.

¹ "The Sound of Silence - Rabbi Sacks on Parsha." OU Torah, 9 June 2016. <https://outorah.org/p/30172/>.

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Psalms 42 and 43. Psalm 42 forms the basis for a well-known hymn in many churches, “As The Deer Panteth for the Water So My Soul Longeth After You”. The lyrics have been modernised but the appeal remains the same. Psalm 42 gives expression to deep human longing for the divine. Indeed, God has set eternity in the human heart (Eccl 3:11). Longing after and praising God may seem an easy task when all is well and life is going our way, but what if it is not? Psalm 42 and in fact its sister Psalm 43 do not shy away from the reality of being downcast, of feeling abandoned and forgotten by God, of being overwhelmed by the injustice of personal grievances. A common refrain and the conclusion to both psalms is

Why are you downcast, O my Soul?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Saviour and my God.

The ancient Jewish spirituality evident here holds these things in tension – on the one hand, on the other hand. The Psalms therefore model and give us permission, on the one hand, to shake a fist at God and “ask why God, why?” and, on the other hand, lift up open, surrendered hands in praise of God. If you are feeling downcast, write a psalm for your moment. List everything that you are struggling with, on the one hand, and then write down as statements of faith, everything you know still to be true of God that you still put your hope in God and will yet praise him.

Galatians 3:23-29. Prior to this passage in verse 19, Paul asks the question “What, then, was the purpose of the law?” or simply “Why then the law?” He answers his question with four points in verses 19–22 and elaborates on his final point from verse 23 onwards, taking up earlier allusions to history.

Paul affirms that God’s purposes and promises have been fulfilled in Messiah Jesus. He views the law’s role not as the equivalent to that of sin, but as a counter to it, providing protection for Israel before the coming of the Messiah. The Torah gave a young Israel the protection it needed from idolatry and the lower moral standards prevalent in the Gentile world as it grew up and matured. Paul, therefore, envisages the previous role of the law as having come to an end in the Messiah but this should not be mistakenly read as Paul arguing for a blanket dismissal of the Torah. Apart from its custodial function, the law represents far more than that and still has a positive role to play.

Paul has the significant realisation that the gospel is for Gentiles as much as for Jews, which prompts him to recognize that the law which distinguishes Jew from Gentile was a restrictive more than a beneficial factor in light of Messiah Jesus. Paul labours this point, speaking of having faith *in* Christ (3:26), being baptised *into* Christ, clothed *with* Christ (3:27), one *in* Christ Jesus (3:28) and finally, belonging *to* Christ (3:29). The language Paul uses implies profound personal transformation as well as the potential for a radically reshaped social world — with the gospel being a powerful integrating

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force for different social groups. Paul is not saying that the differences he mentions magically do not or will not exist, but that such differences cease to be a barrier and cause of pride, regret or embarrassment. They rather become a means in Messiah Jesus to display the diverse richness of God's creation and means of grace. So, if you are struggling with deep divisions and seemingly insurmountable barriers in your church or community, if you are feeling downcast, take heart, Paul offers us as a well-argued hope that is rooted in the Messiah.

Luke 8:26-39. The Gospel reading opens with Jesus and his disciples sailing “to the region of the Gerasenes, which is across the lake from Galilee” (Luke 8:26). Matthew and Mark describe it as being on “the other side” of the sea from where they started on the northern shores at Capernaum (Matt 8:28, Mark 5:1). While the geographical description is clear, the actual historical site of Jesus' encounter with the demoniac man is not. In his book *In The Master's Steps – The Gospels in the Land*, R. Steven Notley describes the argument for Gerasenes referring to either Gadara or Gerasa. Neither neatly fit the geographical description in the Gospels, however, on the basis of topography, the region surrounding the ancient village of Gergesa fits best as it is only in this region that the slopes descend steeply to the shore of the lake. Notley notes that evidence for the village's existence in antiquity is found in rabbinical literature and the writings of Origen and Eusebius, both of whom attest to local pre-Byzantine Christian traditions identifying Gergesa with this Gospel event.

Historical geography aside, the significance of the healing of the demoniac man is wonderfully explained in its ancient Jewish context by Ray Vander Laan in his teaching series “That The World May Know”. Vander Laan summarises the encounter as follows:

Given the Jewish view of the paganism of the Decapolis, it probably was not surprising to the disciples that as soon as he landed there, Jesus met a man (Matthew referred to two men) possessed with a "legion" of demons (Matt 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39). Jesus had just stilled the storm, which the disciples probably also believed was fueled by the powers of evil connected to the depths of the sea (Luke 8:31; Rev 13:1). The devil was unable to prevent Jesus from crossing the sea to enter the pagan territory, so his demonic power confronted Jesus when he came ashore. But Jesus pierced the power of darkness that lay over the demon-possessed man.

When Jesus had cast out the demons, he commanded the man to return home to tell others what God had done for him. The territory to which Jesus sent the man was certainly one of the most challenging mission fields to which he ever called anyone. Later, crowds from the Decapolis followed Jesus. This crowd of followers was a testimony to the effectiveness of the healed man's witness.

Unlike the other Gospel writers, John has the grand reveal in his opening chapter that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” (John 1:1-2). The Word, which he later identifies with Jesus, is “the light that shines in the darkness” (v. 5) and the “true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world” (v.

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9). The healing of the demoniac man is a powerful and beautiful example of Jesus being the light that shines in the darkness, the true light that gives light to everyone.

A golden thread runs through all these readings – the difficulty of despair (1 Kgs 19:1-15a), being downcast (Ps 42 and 43), facing divisions (Gal 3:23-29) and the darkness of the demonic (Luke 8:26-39) – is that despite all these challenges God is faithful, God is praiseworthy and God is close by. God is to be found in the ordinary, telling us we are loved, we are heard, we are embraced by God's everlasting arms, we are not alone. Nowhere is this made more evident than in Messiah Jesus, the light that shines in the darkness and the light of the world.

ACNA Readings

Introduction. Trinity Sunday is past and the time for counting the Sundays after Pentecost has begun. During this season we focus on how the Church has grown since the days of Pentecost, being led by the Holy Spirit. While this season is called “ordinary time” by some, coming from the term, *ordinal* which means to be numbered in sequence, there is nothing ordinary about this time. Rather, it is a time when we may reflect on how the Lord has been at work in our own lives, the lives of his people, and how he will continue to work in the days to come.

Common Theme. The common theme running through the lectionary readings is that of deliverance and restoration. Throughout the history of God's people, deliverance is a common subject. This can be deliverance from a contemporary circumstance, praising the Lord for a past deliverance, or the promise of a future deliverance when promised trouble comes. The result of this deliverance is a restoration to God. As people of God today, we must remember that it is in the Lord that we place our trust, our hope, and faith for deliverance in this age and the age to come.

Zechariah 12:8-10, 13:1. The reading from Zechariah concerns the future salvation of the Jewish people one day in the future. The context of the passage is that Jerusalem will be set upon by her enemies, but the inhabitants of Jerusalem will be given the supernatural ability to resist their enemies. The feeblest, in Hebrew *the ones caused to stumble*, will be like David who conquered the city at the beginning of his reign. This is likely a reference to the boasting of the Jebusites who originally inhabited Jerusalem, who said that the blind and lame would keep him out (2 Sam 5:6-7). The blind and lame would be empowered as David was. In turn, the house of David, the royal line, will be like God himself when the Angel of the Lord led Israel into the victory of the promised land.

Who is this House of David that would lead the people into victory? By the time of Zechariah, the House of David had fallen into ruin. But there was a promise of one who would come from the House of David to deliver his people. That person is the Messiah, the greater son of David, whom we know as Jesus of Nazareth! This Jesus is the one who will be as God before them, as the angel of the Lord leading them into battle.

Alongside this national deliverance from national enemies, the result will be a spiritual restoration when the Jewish people will look upon him whom they have pierced, the Messiah who has been

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leading them in this victory and will mourn over him and the fact that they pierced him. This demonstrates to us that God will keep his promises of deliverance to his people, both spiritually and physically.

Psalm 63. The superscription places this as a psalm written by David when he was fleeing from Saul in the Judean wilderness, truly a dry and weary land with no water. Here, David expressed his longing and desire for God as food and water that would bring relief to him. This recalls the words of Moses which say, “Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3). In this poem, the psalmist praises the Lord for the sustenance he receives from him and knows that he will be safe and delivered by him. He knows that the Lord will deliver him and restore him to the worship he longs for.

This psalm also contains an element of messianic hope in that David does address the enemies he is running from. He states that those who seek his life will one day go down into the depths of the earth and be destroyed, in contrast, the king will be victorious. That the term “the king” (63:11) is used in the same book of the psalter² in Psalm 72 (72:1) for the coming Messiah, the son of David, informs us that David’s enemies would meet their end by the messiah who would vindicate him. David’s ultimate deliverance would come when the Messiah judges his enemies.

Galatians 3:23-29. The lesson from Galatians concerns the deliverance from the Law as a guardian until the Messiah came. This can be a puzzling statement as the Scriptures often speak of the Law as, “holy and righteous and good” (Rom 7:12b), and in Psalm 119, the praises of the Law are pronounced repeatedly (Ps 119:17-24). Yet, one of the teachings of the apostle is that while the Law revealed righteousness, it could not make anyone righteous. Due to this fact, the law held those under its authority captive because of sin. Sin forced the law to condemn us. The term “guardian” is *pedagogue* which denotes a slave who was a keeper over a child and had custody over him until he had come of age. His job was not to give formal education but to keep him away from bad influences and discipline him for wrong behaviors. He was a moral educator. Before the Messiah came, the law functioned in this way, as a moral guide and warden to those under its authority.

With the coming of the Messianic age – faith as the apostle calls it – we have been delivered from this relationship to the law as we have been delivered from by the death, burial, and resurrection of the Messiah. This idea, that the relationship to the law would change with the coming of the Messiah, is also found in Jewish thought such as in Kohelet Rabbah which states, “The Torah that a man learns in this world is vanity in comparison to the Torah of Messiah” (Kohelet Rabbah 11:7). Perhaps this is why the apostle goes on to speak of the “Law of Christ” in the same letter (Gal 6:2). This does not mean that the law is no longer of any value. Rather, it means that the law has become a friend and source of wisdom rather than a pedagogue to the people of God.

² Both Psalm 63 and Psalm 72 are within Book II of the five books of the Psalms.

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Having been delivered from the law in this manner, we have experienced restoration to God in a new way, as children of God, having put on Messiah and being joined to Him and heirs of the promise of Abraham.

Luke 9:18-24. The Gospel reading for this week concerns the confession of Peter followed by a prophecy by the Messiah concerning his death and deliverance. In this passage, Jesus asks the disciples who the crowds believe him to be and then turns the question on his disciples, which Peter speaks for them by saying that Jesus is the Messiah of God. Jesus affirms this but also orders them to not tell people about this. It is interesting that in Jesus' earthly ministry he does not call himself the messiah, but performs many messianic acts and allows others to proclaim his messianic identity for him.

Jesus then gives the prophecy that he would be turned over to the Jewish leaders and be killed by them, but he would not stay dead but would be raised from the dead. Why is this relevant to Peter's confession? Because this is what was prophesied concerning the Messiah in the Hebrew Bible. There is much to say about a reigning Messiah, and thus it is inappropriate to belittle those who believed the Messiah would reign at that time. However, other prophecies speak of the Messiah being betrayed, being handed over by his people to the Gentiles, and being killed, only to be delivered by God (Ps 2, 22, 55:12-14; Isa 53). Thus, Jesus was not giving new information but confirming the words of the prophets who came before him. In these prophecies, the Messiah is often crying out for deliverance from these afflictions. Yet, it is these afflictions that fulfill the prophecies of Israel's deliverance, such as Zechariah and the Messiah who had been pierced. In this passage, Jesus does not say what the manner of execution will be directly, but the statement of carrying their own crosses implies that this would be the manner of death for him.

Jesus also knows that he will be delivered due to these same prophecies. This deliverance would restore Jesus to life and would bring about the restoration of the world such as spoken by the apostle Paul in Galatians as well as enable him to bring about his father David's deliverance by judging the living and the dead when he returns from the father's side. Those who follow Jesus, who take up their cross and give up their life for him, will find the deliverance they long for and be restored to God, saving their very life.

About the RCL author. The Rev. Canon Peter Houston is the national director of CMJ South Africa. He is an Anglican priest and canon theologian in the Diocese of Natal. He holds an M.Phil. in Environmental Management and an M.Th. in Church History and Polity. He is a research associate with Stellenbosch University and has a particular interest in church history and historical theology. He lives in Kloof, South Africa, with his wife and two children.

About the ACNA author. Aaron Gann earned his BA in Jewish Studies at the Moody Bible Institute and is currently studying for his M. Div. at Shepherds Theological Seminary in Cary, North Carolina. He and his wife, Rebecca, live in Raleigh with their two cats and serve at Redeemer Anglican Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. Aaron is an aspirant discerning a call to ordained

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ministry within the Anglican Church in North America in the Diocese of Christ Our Hope. Aaron has taught on various topics such as the Book of Psalms, Messianic Prophecy, Eschatology, and the non-pagan origins of the traditional church festivals. He is passionate about the Jewish roots of the Christian Faith, encouraging and nurturing biblical literacy, reaching the Jewish people with the Gospel of Christ, and developing within the Church a biblically informed love for Israel and the Jewish people.