

June 19, 2022

Year C; Proper 7, Year C

1 Kings 19: 1-15a

Psalm 43

Luke 8: 26-39

1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 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 like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." [Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."] He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of

sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus."

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

I realized this week that what is keeping me going right now is zinnias.

I am late in planting the zinnia seeds I bought in March, seeds I bought in a burst of spring hope, but I finally got them in the ground a week ago.

I always shake my head when I open the seed packets, looking at this hand-full of what looks like the dirt and debris you would sweep off your porch. A few leaves, a few twigs, all light as tiny feathers. I always doubt that they can grow and become glorious, hopeful flowers, tall, swaying in the wind, unwilted by hot temps. Resilient in the face of August.

I planted those seeds looking like just a bit of debris, and a few days later, despite my deep doubts, here they came pushing up skinny green shoots, with tiny leaves, often at first mistaken by me as weeds, but when more and more appear, I recognize them again.

And right now, those half inch tall plants are keeping me going.

Because I am struggling to keep my hope alive. Our world moves so fast. I have not completely taken in the horror of the shooting in Buffalo at Topps Grocery store on May 14, I keep thinking of the old women who died buying their Saturday groceries, Pearl and Ruth and Katherine.

Then just 10 days later on May 24, the Uvalde shooting, where 4th graders died in their last week of school, 10- and 11-year-olds, Uziyah, Xavier, Annabell, Eliahana.

And then three days ago, Thursday evening, at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Vestavia Hills Alabama, at a potluck supper, a 71-year-old man who occasionally attended the church, opened fire and killed three people. The potluck was nicknamed The Boomer Potluck, as it was a gathering of baby boomers, folks in their 60s, 70s and 80s. The three who died were Sarah Yeager, 75, who was taken to the hospital and died there Thursday night, Walter Rainey, 84, who died on the scene, as his wife held him in her arms, and a woman, 84, who died at a hospital the next day.

You may not have heard as much about this shooting because the gunman only had a handgun, and could not shoot as fast as the gunmen at Buffalo or Uvalde. You also may not have heard as much, as only three people died in this shooting, as the definition of a mass shooting generally applies when four or more have died.

Finally, this shooting in Alabama occurred on the eve of the 7th anniversary of the yes, mass shooting, of nine members of Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC in 2015, gunned down by an avowed racist, while they gathered for Bible study.

And then as I write this sermon a notice comes up on my news feed that the war in Ukraine will likely go on for years. Years.....

Those half inch tall zinnias have kept me going this week, hopeful and plucky and unlikely, hopeful when I feel hopeless.

Our reading from 1 Kings brings us the prophet Elijah, who has had a week that frankly makes mine look like a walk in the park!

Here we find a man who is feeling utterly hopeless. He has fought fiercely against King Ahab and his wife Jezebel and their worship of Baal. When we join the story today, Jezebel has issued an immediate death warrant for Elijah saying:

"So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow."

And now Elijah is afraid, and he runs, he travels into the wilderness and there:

He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

Elijah feels that he has failed God, not doing enough to keep folks from worshipping Baal rather than God, for following the shiny idol rather than God.

And then, as often happens when we feel hopeless, Elijah is also exhausted and falls asleep. And an angel comes not to teach him, or to lecture him or to cheer him on; no the angel comes to feed him, to feed him cake and water, and then let him sleep some more.

The angel comes a second time and feeds Elijah again, not to send him back into battle, but to be sure he can now journey forward, the angel saying:

Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.

Otherwise the journey will be too much for you....

And with the second feeding, Elijah can travel 40 days and nights until he comes to a cave and stays the night.

And God comes to Elijah and asks what he is doing there. And Elijah, despite the angel tending to him with rest and cakes and water, and the 40 days and nights, Elijah is still without hope, though he no longer asks to die. Elijah does tell God that he has done all he can to fight the false prophets, but that he is now the only one left fighting and Elijah tells God:

"I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Elijah is without hope and feels that it is all up to him. We can understand this feeling; I can understand this feeling, putting too much on our own shoulders and forgetting that God is God, that we work with God, not alone, never alone.

And then God stops discussing with Elijah, sometimes words can be no more help. And instead God tells him to go out on the mountain and wait for God to pass by.

And so Elijah stops talking and starts listening and waits for God:

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and

breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

God in the sheer silence, the utter silence. One writer wisely noted how hard it can be to find:

How do we hear God's voice? How can we find utter silence? It can be hard. We live in a world full of noise, including noise from people who declare that they have messages from God without truly listening to our Creator. Chances are that we all know people like the wind, the earthquake, and the fire. (Presbyterian Outlook, Rev. Cecelia Armstrong)

With all the noise and the noisy in our world, I am grateful I could hear God in the zinnias this week; for tiny, resilient hope in my hopelessness.

We are not called to do everything, as Elijah came to understand, he was not the only one left.

But we are called to not give up, to stop and rest, and eat the cake and drink the water, and hear the wisdom from angels:

Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.

So today, I gaze upon the zinnias now an inch tall! And I see the miracle of the sun rising again on our tired and broken world, and I'll start again the journey, the journey of sharing God's love, of standing with folks in tragedies beyond words, in not rushing on and forgetting the pain of those who died in April in Ukraine, in May in Buffalo and Uvalde, and in June in Vestavia Hills.

In remembering their names and saying them out loud, Pearl, Uziah, Walter.....

Leaving room for the sheer silence so we can name those our hearts break for, those places we weep for in our prayers.

So today we will begin a time of doing our prayers a bit differently. Rather than my offering a prayer for Ukraine for us or for other places or people, we

will all have time in the sheer silence to pray.

Please turn to pages 6/7 (Trinity) 7/8 (SMWC) in your bulletins and note the space for silence. I ask our leaders Jane/Warren to leave ample space for that silence, that sheer silence of God and you are invited to offer a name, a place, a word, out loud or silently. We have three places to offer:

Those in need

Blessings of this life

Those who have died

We will leave a bit of room for God's sheer silence, a bit of room with our God, a bit of room for the tiny green shoots, for us to be, for the first time, and again, vessels of God's hope for those without hope.

Amen.