1 Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a

Psalms 42 and 43

Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8:26-39

Whoever said the Bible was a dull read? Today we have two great stories to ponder. In the first, Queen Jezebel is threatening to kill the prophet Elijah because he has just slain 400 prophets of Baal…her religious and political supporters. Elijah flees to the wilderness and on the mountain top he experiences wind and earthquakes and fire….and the presence of God. In today’s Good News from Luke, we hear about Jesus being confronted by a man possessed by a legion of demons. The demons are expelled, enter a heard of pigs, they stampede into the nearby lake and drown. No wonder the folks around Gerasene asked Jesus to go home. What do these readings have to say to us today? Have you recently encountered prophets or demons? How are these stories supposed to build us up so that we can participate more fully in God’s great mission of reconciliation?

10am What do these stories have to tell us about baptism?

Let me suggest that the texts we heard today present us with an invitation, no, a command really, to get on with our discipleship in spite of threats, fear, depression, demons….you know, those everyday things of life. We are called to witness to the good news of God in Christ in the midst of the turmoil and anxieties. We are called to declare to those near and far how much God has done for us.

Our first reading today was about Elijah, one of the most revered of all the Hebrew prophets, although there are very few stories about him in the Bible. Elijah was in a panic because the blood-thirsty Jezebel had threatened his life. He fled from his home and went to Beer-sheba, the equivalent of our going from Chula Vista to El Centro – on foot! But he still didn’t feel safe there, so he went another day’s journey – like from El Centro to Yuma. Elijah was depressed and wanted to die, and he wanted to die alone, in the wilderness, under a scraggly tree. But God had other plans for him. Haven’t we all had that experience – making plans that turn out to be something different from what God is ultimately calling us to do?

For Elijah, God provided food and water to build up his strength so that he could travel to Mount Horeb as God instructed him to do, a journey of 40 days and nights – still on foot. Upon arriving at the mountain, God had the audacity to ask him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” My impulse would have been to respond sarcastically, “What am I doing here? You tell me.” You’re the one who sent me here. But I don’t hear that sentiment in Elijah’s response. He said, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, … I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

Then we have that great scene of Elijah huddled up in a cave while a great storm builds, with winds so fierce that solid rock couldn’t withstand its fury. And then there was the earthquake. We all have some sense of how un-nerving that can be. The earthquake was followed by fire. Again, we know how devastating fire can be. Can you imagine what Elijah must have felt like as he was awaiting an encounter with God? God was not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire. And then there came silence…“sheer silence.” It was in the midst of that silence that Elijah heard God ask again, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah responded as he had before, “I have been very zealous for the Lord…I alone am left and they are seeking my life…”

God says to him: “Go, return (home)…” a seemingly simple command, one that is not hard to understand, but one whose implications are vast. Go back to where you came from. Continue to do what you were doing. Know that I am with you. God clearly was inviting Elijah to continue in this relationship with God, to continue in this mission with God, to continue in this calling from God.

8:00 Does that sound something like what you are experiencing here at St. John’s - God’s invitation to journey beyond the fire, beyond clergy having heart attacks, beyond the school closure? God’s invitation is to trust in God and in each other. God’s invitation affirms and yet also challenges.

10:00 That is the invitation Patrick and Tiffany are responding to today, as they bring their son Liam here to be baptized. They have heard God’s call to be in relationship with God. They have experienced God’s compassionate presence in their lives. They have learned that true life has a meaning that is deeper than physical safety or comfort. They want to share all that, and more, with Liam. They want Liam to know this God who will love him now and be with him into eternity.

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We also hear about God’s invitation to us in today’s Gospel story. While this story about the demoniac might seem familiar, there are some important details that we might miss. First of all, Jesus and the disciples had crossed the lake from Galilee in Israel, into the non-Jewish area of Gerasene. They were now aliens in a foreign land. Next, the demons that possessed the man recognized Jesus as the Son of the Most High God. This was possibly shocking to some of Jesus’ disciples who had not quite arrived at that same clarity of perception. Then we have the folks who had to live with the possessed man. They tried to preserve his well-being as well as theirs by shackling him and guarding him. But the focus of the story, of course, is the man who had been possessed by the demons and then freed from them by Jesus. When this legion of demons was expelled from his body, the man returned to normalcy… clothed, in his right mind, seated at Jesus’ feet, like any other good disciple. Because of the new freedom he now experienced, he was ready to head off with Jesus’ disciples to the other side of the lake, into what was for him foreign territory. In losing his demons, he seems to have gained not only a new freedom, but also a new community, and a new leader, Jesus. And so he asked, “Jesus can I follow you?” And Jesus’ response was, “Go. Return to your home.” Jesus directed him to carry out his new discipleship, not in the land of the dead, not in a foreign territory, but back home. Sounds a lot like what God said to Elijah, doesn’t it?

8:00 And it also sounds a lot like what God is saying to the faithful here at St. John’s too. Believe in this community. Love this community. Serve this community.

10:00 Does that sound familiar to you Tiffany and Patrick? Believe in this Christian community of St. John’s. Believe in the love that God has shown to you through your family and friends. Stick with these people. Love these people. Serve these people. And by bringing Liam into a deeper spiritual relationship with these people through baptism, I presume that you are hoping and praying that he too will come to understand the joy and fulfillment of being part of such a community.

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God is calling each of us to move beyond the threats and fears, the frustrations and anxieties, the depression and demons that we experience in everyday life. God is calling each of us to dare to walk toward the unknown, trusting that God will always be with us. God is calling each of us to get on with our discipleship, to take part in God’s great quest to renew the face of the earth, to reconcile all creation, to heal the ravages of sin.

8:00 Like Elijah, let us be zealous for the Lord, regardless of what it costs. Like the man freed from his demons, let us proclaim to all we meet how much God has done for us. Like faith-filled followers of Jesus let us place all our trust in God, a God who calls us out of darkness into light, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.

10:00 This is what baptism is all about. Through water and the Holy Spirit, Liam will be transformed and transfigured into the image of Jesus. Through our faith and prayers, Liam will become part of God’s new creation. Through our words and actions, Liam will be commissioned to go out into the world to spread the Good News of God’s love for all. So let us baptize this young child and declare to all to all we meet how much God has done for us.