

UNDER THE BROOM TREE

FIRST KINGS 19: 4-8

AUGUST 9, 2009 – UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF CHICAGO

EUGENE H. WINKLER, Pastor

You have an album of photographs that chronicle the story of your family's history, its births and celebrations, its trips and triumphs, its deaths and changes. The album is stored on a shelf and from time to time you take it down, leaf through the pictures, perhaps tell a new friend about your family and show the fading photographs, tell your friend about Aunt Margaret or your grandfather or your cousin Susan and you say, "Here she is. She's the one you've heard me talk about. This is what she looked like."

Or you take the album with you when you go to visit family at the lake in August. You and your remaining family members look at the pictures of the picnics, reunions, weddings and vacations. And you remember each time, savor it again, as the pictures excite your memories.

And yet. And yet, the photograph is not reality. It only depicts a brief moment of a reality that vanished the moment the camera's shutter clicked. The photograph is not and was not the experience itself. It simply froze an instant of time so that you could recall some of the sights and sounds and smells, dreams and fantasies and hopes years later.

Still, it's tempting to let the pictures in the album substitute for reality. It's very difficult to keep them from becoming the experience itself.

The emotional and spiritual gap between the way we recall the experience and the moment itself can lead us into despair. That's what today's First Lection means to the prophet Elijah the Tishbite. He is on the run, which is remarkable because, in the previous chapter, he won a great victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah had taunted the prophets of Baal to prove that their god was real. They ranted and injured themselves to incite Baal to act, but nothing happened.

Then Elijah built an altar and prepared a sacrifice. He put water all over and around the altar. Then he prayed to YHWH. Immediately the fire fell from heaven and consumed everything. When the Israelites saw it, they fell on their faces and shouted, "YHWH is indeed God" (1 Kings 18:39). The prophets of Baal were seized, and the echo of Elijah's bold actions against apostasy sounded throughout the land.

When King Ahab reported this event to his wife Jezebel, she became furious and promised to kill Elijah. And while their names are not mentioned into day's reading, Israel's king and queen are the ominous threats in the background. This was a political event. Elijah was a constant menace toward the royal house. He killed the prophets of Baal who were strong supporters of the queen. Such an affront could not go unanswered.

It was also a theological event. Elijah made the prophets of Baal and therefore Baal the false god look like fools. As a result, the queen deemed Elijah a criminal, an enemy of the state. He had to flee for his

life, out of the territory of Jezebel and Ahab. He fled south, to Beersheba in Judah. There he left his servant and went on farther south alone, a day's journey in the wilderness. He was a hunted man.

To put this moment in context, we have to consider what the Bible means when the word "wilderness" occurs. The wilderness is rocks, desert, constant burning sun, very few trees, no water, nothingness—a very dangerous and desolate place with little to support life. One of the ancient myths told in Israel declares that when God created the world, a young angel was given seven baskets of rocks to distribute over the entire world. After flying all around the world and distributing one basket of rocks on every part of God's creation, the young angel grew tired and just dumped the other six baskets of rocks on Palestine.

It is to such a place that Elijah comes. He is completely worn out, distressed and dismayed. He is at the end of his tether and falls asleep. He cannot escape the heat of the sun or the despair of his heart. The Hebrew says explicitly that Elijan sat under a solitary broom tree. The lonely broom tree reflects Elijah's situation of isolation, depression, disillusion and a sense of futility.

But then comes the second part of the story. While he is sleeping, he hears a voice saying, "Get up and eat." And there before him was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. He ate and drank and laid down a second time. And again an angel touched him and commanded him to eat and drink lest the journey ahead would be too much for him. So Elijah got up and ate and drank and went, the account declares, "in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God" (v. 8).

There is nothing abstract about this story. Words like "anger" and "love" and "hope" and "despair" are absent from the account. Biblical materials in general and prophetic narratives in particular—not least, this familiar passage regarding Elijah—give us a testimony that is neither fuzzy nor shapeless. The text uses concrete words—forty days and forty nights, broom tree, a baked cake, a jar of water, the journey, the mountain of God.

Elijah is our soul brother. Although he has called fire from heaven, Elijah himself quickly melts in the heat of Jezebel's rage. He fears for his life, leaves both Mount Carmel and his servant and goes into the wilderness, where he prays to die.

I don't want to read too much pastoral psychology into Elijah's reasons for fleeing, declaring that "I am no better than my ancestors" and feeling depression, despair and regret. The story is about God's providing for Elijah in spite of himself—just as God provided manna and quail for his ancestors.

I call myself a connoisseur of regret. Created as I am with a fairly good memory and cursed with a personality that deals with depression in several of its various forms, that devil called regret plagues my consciousness and my conscience on a daily—sometimes hourly—basis. So Elijah's lament speaks to me personally as well as prophetically. The spiritual and emotional wilderness is a place of both giving and testing, a season of provision and obedience, a time of physical weakness and even despair, but also an occasion of spiritual strengthening and vocational redefinition.

A very talented writer who struggled all his life with memory and regret helps me at this point. James Agee was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his novel, *A Death in the Family*, based on the trauma of his father's tragic death in an automobile accident when Jimmy was six years old. His earlier novel, *The Morning Watch*, was also autobiographical and interpreted his relationship in an exclusive boarding school in Sewanee, Tennessee with an Episcopal priest, Father James Flye, who had a profound influence on Agee's life and thought.

Agee wrote film criticism, some of the best that informed such subsequent critics as Pauline Kael, Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel. He also wrote screenplays, most notably *The African Queen*, which starred Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn.

I think of Agee as a kind of modern-day, thoroughly secular Elijah, because he was always drawn to a Christian view of life and people but he was wary of institutions—like the Church. We know from his correspondence with Father Flye how Agee was intrigued by religion but afraid of rules and regulations. He had a very keen eye for the phony and pretentious, and anyone who possesses such a view can have a difficult time with organized religion. (He would have made a perfect member of University Church, don't you agree?)

A Death in the Family is set in Knoxville, Tennessee in the 1920's. The mother, Mary Follett, is deeply pious, somewhat reserved, a high-church Episcopalian and a lady—definitely a lady, a very proper lady. The father, Jay Follett, likes the very things that Mary calls vulgar and nasty. He comes from that long line of Southern farm workers who have moved to cities like Knoxville to exchange one form of misery for another. A paycheck, less hunger and malnutrition, some amenities, at last, do not compensate for a deep sadness and loss that amount to a continuing form of bereavement.

Mary's piety is simple: just believe in God. Life is beyond anyone's comprehension, but God is not to be turned out on that account. Just believe in God and all will be well. Mary is proud of her faith, and pride works in many ways—devotion can conceal a self-centered, demanding streak of possessiveness. I will give you my all, but you must take note of my piety.

In one of the early scenes of the novel, the boy Rufus (James Agee when he was a lad) and the father, Jay, go to a Charlie Chapin movie. This is prior, of course, to Jay's death when Mary will be left to bring up Rufus and his four-year-old sister, Catherine. How such a believing, pious woman copes with such a test from God is the story of the novel. Rufus tries to comprehend what he sees and senses, what he overhears or is directly told about his father's accident.

But already on this night when they walk home after the movie, Rufus senses in the dark that his father is leaving. After they have a snack, they sit together on a rock in the dark, vacant lot, watching the night, scanning the city's lights, noticing the stillness of the evening, broken by occasional sounds. Finally, they approach their home, feeling very close to each other, yet also removed from each other.

Agee knows that a disaster bring to focus and heightens the importance of all that has preceded it. Tragically, unexpectedly, the natural ups and downs of a person's life, a family's life, have to be tested.

And they find us either sufficient or wanting, prepared or failing. Such a test is unfair and hard, but it drives us back on our faith, whatever form that faith really takes.

“God will provide.” Those words that Abraham spoke to his only son, Isaac, on the way up the mountain where Abraham has been commanded to kill the boy speak to Elijah in the wilderness, and God’s provision (God’s providence) exceeds the prophet’s expectations and gives him sustenance for the journey of forty days and forty nights.

That’s the most difficult lesson for us to learn—that God gives grace to us freely, without reservation, without expecting us to meet certain standards in order to deserve it. Martin Luther preached that grace over and over again, not just because he had learned it the hard way in his own life, not just because of his hardscrabble childhood with a demanding father who would not give love unless Martin could prove he had been good enough to deserve it, because Luther came to the great spiritual truth in the middle of his life that we are justified by faith, by faith alone. And that good works follow.

As a brilliant, young Augustinian monk, Luther tried every spiritual quest and exercise to be good enough, to relieve his ever-increasing sense of guilt. He walked all the way from northeast Germany over the Alps to Rome. And when he got to Rome, he climbed the steps to the Sistine Chapel on his bloody knees, praying at each step. But the guilt would not go away.

It was only when he faced the death of a good friend and the terror that he might die in sin on a day when he was caught in a terrible lightning storm that he came to the realization that God doesn’t love us because we are good. We can’t ever be that good. God loves us because we are God’s children, God’s own creation, and our goodness follows in response to such a wonderful, powerful, magnificent gift.

Many of us, like Luther, have been beaten up in unloving relationships in which love was not given until we earned it, and we discovered that we would never be good enough, live up to the expectations of the other so that we could earn it. We have experienced great sadness and frustration every time we have been in such a relationship, because the standards are always too high, always exceeding our ability to measure up.

But God’s love is different. God’s love is unconditional, given because we were created for a purpose, and so embracing so that it is like the love of the most tender mother in the world who touches us at exactly the place we hurt the most, who embraces us with acceptance and forgiveness when we most need it.

That’s what Elijah discovers in this moment in the wilderness. His redemption, like ours, takes time. It requires compassionate nurture and the recovery of Elijah’s sense of his value to God. Elijah’s worth is not based on his performing great feats for God or dependent upon overcoming evil in his own strength. Elijah’s worth is found in God’s love for him and in the call of God upon his life.

Your worth and mine does not depend upon living a sinless life. It is the concrete love of God that provides us with self-worth and gives meaning to our life.