

## What Are You Doing Here? – FATHER’S DAY – June 19

**Scripture:** 1 Kings 19:1-15 (9)

**Unison:** Psalm 42:1-11

**HYMNS:** 1) 423 “Great is Your Faithfulness” 2) 581 “Lead Us from Death to Life” 3) PILGRIM HYMNAL 485 “This is My Father’s World” (Print as an insert)

### CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Bring your longing, bring your hope.

People: God is with us here.

L: lay down your fears, lay aside your doubts.

P: Faith has called us here.

L: Pour out your soul, with prayer and praise.

P: We come to worship God.

### INVOCATION AND LORD’S PRAYER

Come to us in the times of silence, O God. Speak to our hearts, so that we may hear and respond. Soothe our souls, so that we may rest and renew. Strengthen our spirits, so that we may grow in faith and courage. In Christ’s name we pray, “Our Father...”

### 1 Kings 19:1-15

19Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup>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.” <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>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.” <sup>5</sup>Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup>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?”<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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;<sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.<sup>13</sup> 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?”<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup> Then the Lord said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.

## THE SERMON

One year ago yesterday, a young white man dropped in on a Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church, and after an hour of Bible and prayer he gunned down nine of the ten people there, shouting hate filled statements about black people. One week ago today, a man came to the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, a gay bar, and opened fire. He killed 49 people and wounded many more, before he did in a gun battle with police. His hatred of homosexuality was the apparent reason for this awful deed.

These are terrible things. It’s been hard to think about them, they make me so sad. What makes us go after each other in such fear and hatred?

At the end of this week, we’ll be welcoming Congregationalists from all over the country to the NACCC Annual Meeting and Conference. Our theme is “Who is my Neighbor?” a question asked of Jesus, a question that prompted the powerful story of the Good Samaritan, and the conclusion that EVERYONE is your neighbor. EVERYONE is my neighbor. EVERYONE. That’ll be the focus next Sunday when many people from the conference will be worshipping with us. But

today, that goal of neighborliness feels shaken. How to respond? What are we supposed to do? And, for me, what in scripture can shed light on our situation?

So today we have the rest of a story that I engaged a few weeks ago, the contest of wills between the prophet Elijah on the one side, God's side, and the wicked and unfaithful Ahab, King of the Israelites, and his wife Jezebel. We heard how Elijah proposed a contest with the prophets of Baal, the god that Ahab and his queen worshiped and made the state religion of Israel. How the prophets of Baal could not bring a single spark when they prayed for fire, while Elijah stepped aside, called upon God, and fire poured down, a display of God's power that changed the hearts and minds of the Israelites. Yeah! That's our God! The real, the living God! God really showed them, right?

But if there's one common theme in the Bible, it's that people draw near to God and then they fall away. The attraction to power pulls human beings this way and that way, and finding the right path, the path of life and ethical functioning, the path of God, requires bold action.

After the contest with the prophets of Baal, the drought that had gripped the northern kingdom ended. And Ahab went home and told Jezebel what had happened, how her prophets were dead at the hands of the Israelites (never mind the prophets of God she had the Israelites kill), and she issued a death warrant for Elijah, saying effectively, "I'll show him what dead is!" never mind that she had sponsored the killing of many of God's prophets. This was war. And when he heard about this death threat, Elijah did what? Did he stand firm? Did he trust in God? Did he speak out? No, he did not. He ran away and hid, and prayed to God, "Just kill me now, Lord."

Well, if he REALLY wanted to die, of course he could have gone to Jezreel, where Ahab and Jezebel lived and they'd have taken care of it. But he didn't do that, so it's safe to assume that what he was thinking and feeling was a lot like we've heard this past week: I just can't even. I can't take it in. I can't bear these feelings. We've felt this over and over. The struggle is too hard, the news is too bad, I'm too sad, the problems are too big, I feel helpless. I feel angry. It's too much, I just want OUT. Doesn't that sound familiar? I have thought and felt many versions of these things this week alone.

So Elijah was overcome, and exhausted, and just used up. He'd had a victory and then discovered that it doesn't end there. That nothing was settled, that there was so much more to do. He lay down in the wilderness under a scrubby broom tree and slept. Suddenly, he wasn't alone! An angel touched him and said, well what message would you think might come from God? Get up and get back there! Still work to do! How can you sleep at a time like this! Where is your faith? But that is NOT what the angel said. The angel said words that everyone in crisis really needs to hear, "Get up and eat something. Here it is." Elijah ate and then lay down again. And the angel came and touched him again and said something of profound truth to everyone

who is overwhelmed with grief, exhausted from trying. “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”

Elijah didn't need goading or being yelled at; he needed time to restore, time to recover from the shock and despair. Every church person who's taken a casserole or muffins or cookies to someone at a time of great loss and sadness understands this very thing. Some self-care has to take place in times of deep distress or nothing else can. And it's not just material provisions in this story: God has offered these things to Elijah out of profound understanding of what he's going through, out of compassion for Elijah's exhaustion and depression. We need that. We can offer that. We can open channels for that for others.

Then, Elijah found he did have the strength to get up from the place where he collapsed. He was strong enough, the Bible says, to go for 40 days and 40 nights, a long time! But he did not go back to Jezreel. He didn't go on to Jerusalem. He went on to Horeb, the mountain of God, the mountain of the 10 Commandments, the mountain where God appeared to Moses. He found a cave, and night fell, and God spoke to him and said....what might God have said? Words of comfort? Words inviting Elijah to stay there? Or words of criticism—go away! This is not the place for you! How dare you come here like this? But that is NOT what God said. God asked one question: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” and waited for Elijah to answer.

Elijah said some things we'd understand today. The culture is rotten. Your prophets who I trained have been killed by the people they were supposed to serve. It just seems hopeless...in fact I'm the ONLY ONE LEFT, God, and they are trying to kill me, and you are asking what I am doing here far from all the troubles???

And God responded. There was a lot that God might have said that God did NOT say. God did not say, don't feel that way. Soldier on. Put on a brave face. You should be over this by now, you should be used to that. And God did not say, so they hate you, where is your gumption? Go show them how angry you can be! Go kick some you-know-what!

What God DID say was something quite different. “Go out on the mountain, God said, for I am about to pass by.” You will perceive me. Who wouldn't want that! For God to draw near to us in our distress! Maybe answer some questions? Maybe fill us with righteous anger, or just righteousness? Maybe give a reason to go on?

Elijah went out. And there was a wind so strong it broke the rocks. But God was not in the wind. And there was an earthquake, how terrifying! But God was not in the earthquake. And there was a fire, but God was not in the fire. All these signs of power, all these terrible things—God was not in them. We are like Elijah in so many ways. When it's a time of distress, we want God to act, to have God exercise power, to fix it, or to give us the power and permission to use it.

But when we meet hate with hate, might with might, we find what Elijah found: God is not in that.

After all those terrible events, there came the sound of sheer silence. Something we never actually have, certainly not in a world of so many natural and human and mechanical and digital noises. I think that word “sheer” to describe the silence point out that it was unusual, unique, not an absence of sound but the absolute presence of waiting, anticipation of something to be heard.

And what was heard was God asking again the question: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” But this time, the question comes in a time when Elijah has really been watching and waiting and anticipating the presence of God. A time of discernment. A time to reflect on how powerful and different from humans God really is. We have no director’s notes, no author’s asides, to know how Elijah’s answer sounded, how it was inflected. He said the same thing to God: “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” The same complaint, but I have to think there’s some self-reflection there, that the meaning of what has happened and what might come next is emerging in Elijah’s mind.

It needs to happen in our minds too, in our own time. What we are to do needs to come from a time of discernment. We have what Elijah did not: the scriptures and stories of his time, and the stories of Jesus to open our minds. So what do we need to do, to bring to the times of tragedy, to THESE times of tragedy, when people are killed in anger and some kind of belief that this will make the statement and solve the problem made large by hatred? How can we respond in discerning ways to what is happening in our times? This story, and the gospel, make some clear suggestions:

**SHOW EMPATHY** – Weep with those who weep. This week has been full of political interpretations, and people all over this issue of a mass shooting in a gay club with automatic weapons have gone to the angry place, the blaming place, the place that wants to show power. In many situations of loss, there comes a point where the question becomes, aren’t you over this yet? But we are not called to judge; we are called to be present, to feel the loss and the sorrow, our own and others’, and sit with one another. To share the grief of life.

**OFFER STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY** – Elijah was no good to anybody when he was exhausted and desperate. No number of encouraging sayings from God or any one else would have helped him; he needed care. Food. Water. Sleep. Kindness. We can offer that to those in need. Only then will anything we have to say be trusted, or even heard.

ENGAGE CONVERSATION & UNDERSTANDING – We do need to say things; but even more we need to learn to hear things. To hear the experiences of others without judging them or comparing them. To ask, what does this mean to you, and then really listen to the answer. To hear what it means to the black and to the gay communities to be the targets of such violence. To hear what it means to your neighbor who doesn't believe in God or who worships in a different faith tradition. The work of discipleship involves a whole lot more listening than talking, and God calls us to understand one another as a way to ultimately better understand ourselves and our place in the world.

DIG DEEP FOR A RESPONSE THAT REFLECTS THE GOSPEL – I know how I feel when I'm hurt. I'd like to hit back. I imagine all the smart responses I could make that would cut the other person to the quick. But as followers of Jesus, we do not have that luxury! "Do not repay evil for evil but repay evil with good," Jesus said. And he said, "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." Oh, Lord, why??? It sounds like too much to ask! Or, to use Elijah's categories, Lord, they killed the other prophets and I'm the only one left and they are coming for me! But we know that this going against our grain is an essential part of the gospel. We need to practice such complete compassion that we have it for even our enemies. So that when we struggle against them, we are not becoming like them but lifting up a powerful witness. Gandhi read those passages from Jesus' teachings and took them to heart. Martin Luther King did too, and it was the nonviolence of the civil rights movement that finally changed hearts and minds. That is not to say don't confront evil; we must. It is to say, don't stoop to evil in the confrontation.

The people of Mother Emanuel church demonstrated that last year, as they prayed for the shooter who killed several of their pastors, and declared that while he would be held accountable, they would not resort to hatred, but would trust in love. This kind of forgiveness sharpens our vision and clears our minds. It gives us the power to challenge stereotypes and look at people in their complexity. It gives the courage to call out hatred and name bullying for what it is, not power but the defensiveness of weakness in a terrible, toxic form. And it gives us courage to turn from making stereotypes and hatred and bullying our response.

Our world is very broken. That is the moral tale of the fall of humanity: how could things that should have been all good have gone so bad? We are afraid of the brokenness. OUR brokenness. We are intimidated by the power of evil, and like Elijah find ourselves looking at the fire and the earthquake and the whirlwind and saying, "Where is God?" But in sheer silence, in times of discernment and reflection, we discover God is with us always, saying, "What are you doing here?"

I want to share a story about the power of nature, the presence of God, and the power of a godly vision. Last year, a couple of days after the Charleston shooting, we were in Salt Lake City at the NACCC meeting and my friend and colleague, my CFTS roommate, Marilyn Danielson, got

the call no pastor wants; her church, First Congregational Church of Portland, Michigan, had been hit by a tornado. No one was harmed, but the church was a total loss. We prayed with her, and then she went back to Michigan. It was bad. The bell tower was thrown through the sanctuary floor. The bell was at the very bottom of the wreckage. It was hard to imagine how they would rebuild. When the rubble clearing got to the bell and brought it up, Marilyn prayed over it, laid hands on it, and said, "This bell will ring again." And I will tell you that last month, it did just that, on top of a new, much more structurally sound, reconstructed church. The bell has rung again, not just to prove persistence, but to call people to a vision of a world where catastrophe does not have the last word, where good prevails over evil, where compassion and care are practiced, where all people see one another as neighbors. A vision of the Kingdom of God, a vision Jesus came to teach, a vision that led Jesus to his death, as the hatred of the world sought to silence that vision, and a vision come into being when he rose again, showing us the power of love and the loving power of God, the light shining in the darkness that cannot be put out.

We are keepers of that vision too. Sometimes it's hard to have the courage to serve it. But serve it we will. Our middle hymn today was a setting of the world peace prayer. Let us pray for God to show us what we are doing here as we hear again those words:

Lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth, From despair to hope, from fear to trust,  
lead us from hatred to love, from war to peace; let peace fill our hearts, let peace fill our world,  
let peace fill our universe.

Still all the angry cries, still all the angry guns, Still now your people die, earth's sons and  
daughters. Let Justice roll, let mercy pour down, come and teach us Your way of compassion.

So many lonely hearts, so many broken lives, longing for love to break into their darkness.  
Come, teach us love, come, teach us peace, come and teach us Your way of compassion.

Let justice ever roll, let mercy fill the earth, let us begin to grow into your people. We can be  
love, we can be peace, we can be Your way of compassion.

Lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth, from despair to hope, from fear to trust,  
lead us from hatred to love, from war to peace; let peace fill our hearts, let peace fill our world,  
let peace fill our universe. (*Refrain: Satish Kumar; Stanzas, Marty Haugen, 1985*)

AMEN.