

## What Are You Doing Here?

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society  
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Rev. David Good  
and  
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Even though he couldn't be here this morning, David generously sent me the sermon he planned to offer this morning along with his blessing to use, edit, or discard what he had sent. I promised him that no matter what I chose to do, I would honor the spirit of the words he prepared for all of you this morning.

Now, David, being a Congregational minister, included a scripture lesson on 1 Kings 19:1-15 with the sermon he sent. I, being a Unitarian Universalist minister, chose to replace that with the brief I offered as our first reading. A poem by Philip Appleman in which the poet offers the Gods some "humble advice" in order make the world a better place,

"Make the bad people good —  
and the good people nice;  
and before our world goes over the brink,  
teach the believers how to think."

You see, Appleman's poem and 1 Kings 19 address a shared concern related to our conception/experience of God, especially in hard times, and how that God is thus operative in the world.

In 1 Kings the prophet Elijah starts out as what we might call a "true believer." A person very attached to what David calls, "a metaphysical God, a God up there and out there some place that intervenes with fire and brimstone." So committed was Elijah to this conception that in a confrontation we could characterize as "my god is better than your god", 2 bulls and 450 rival prophets are killed, according to the text. But soon after, a change of fortune finds Elijah on a journey. A journey described in the text as physical but it could also be understood as internal. And during that journey Elijah encounters God in a new and unexpected way...as a "still small voice, or as David describes it, "a whisper of truth present within ourselves." Appleman might say the Gods heeded his advice and taught Elijah how to think which we might understand as extending beyond reason alone to also embrace mystery, engage the imagination, and enliven our conscience.

All of this great, but now what? What does one do with an enlivened conscience, whether one hears it as the still, small voice of God within or discerns it as the wisdom of one's own heart?

Well, in a word, incarnation. Which is another way of saying, one acts, enfleshing that still, small voice or one's discerned wisdom, making it operative in the world.

David illustrates what this can look like through two stories which I will now share. He writes,

Sometimes we succeed and sometimes we fail, but I'd like to share the stories of two individuals we have met in our Tree of Life Journeys who have succeeded in showing themselves to be a part of that blessed incarnation.

A Jew and a Muslim who are just as much a part of the landscape as Mt. Carmel and Mt. Sinai. Indeed, if these two remarkable people hadn't listened to that still small voice of conscience, they might very well have been antagonists on Mt. Carmel like the prophet Elijah and the prophets of Baal, each one trying to prove the supremacy of his God.

Each year for that last 20 years, we have visited the Holy Land, and on one of our first visits, we spent time with Rami Elhanan.

In our conversation, Rami leans forward with a voice as calm as listening to Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata". Rami is a businessman, a graphic designer. He came to the place where we were staying, St. George's Cathedral in East Jerusalem, and he shared with us his story. We'll call it the Gospel According to Rami Elhanan.

Rami is Jewish. His father was a survivor of Auschwitz, and so he was, as it says in the prophecy of Isaiah, "a man acquainted with sorrow." But nothing could have prepared him for the terrible experience he had 18 years ago. His 14-year-old daughter was killed by a suicide bomber.

Now, what does one do with such a tragedy? I think we all would understand it if he himself was driven mad with anger and ideas of vengeance and violent retribution. Given the depth of this suffering, we would understand it if he became an outspoken proponent for more and more demonstrations of military power.

But the Spirit that God has given us is a very good spirit and a very unpredictable Spirit. In the strange alchemy that only God can perform, sometimes the most beautiful nobility and dignity of spirit can be born out of the depths of human suffering.

But I think I'll let Rami speak for himself. These are his words:

When a tragedy happens to a person and his world collapses around him he unwillingly finds himself at a junction and must choose one of two directions:

He can sink into the depth of hatred, depression, emptiness and wait for salvation and for a welcome end to his agony.

But there is another possibility. He can try to understand, To overcome the tragedy, gather his strength, speak to people's hearts and bring to others this understanding.

Then not only is it possible, but it is necessary, once and for all, to break this seemingly endless cycle of bloodshed.

"Isn't this," David asks, "how God is operative in the world, not in earthquakes, wind, fire or fire power, but rather in the still small voice of conscience?"

For David's second incarnation story, he shares the story of his Muslim friend, Ibrahim Khalil, writing,

After our stay in Bethlehem and Beit Sahour, we then travel north, up toward the Galilee – as they would say, taking us ever so close to the fields and the hills where Jesus began his ministry, so for me, that's always a particularly sacred part of our journey.

In a small farming village near Nablus, we visited the family farm of a man by the name of Ibrahim Khalil.

Ibrahim Khalil is a farmer. His family has had an olive farm for countless generations, with some of those trees, like those in the Garden of Gethsemane, dating back hundreds of years, every ring on every tree a testament to the love and care and the tenderness that a farmer feels for his trees.

Now, as perhaps you know, one of the realities in the occupied territories is that there are more and more settlements springing up in the West Bank.

Well, this is the context in which we find the story of Ibrahim Khalil. One night settlers came and drilled holes and inserted poison in 300 of his 300 year old trees, killing all of those trees.

But this wasn't the only tragedy he would encounter. Around the same time, Ibrahim's son was run over and killed by a settler. Whether this was an accident or a deliberate act of violence, we do not know.

As Ibrahim shared this tragic story, we were standing on his roof top looking out over the valley of his farm, and in trying to explain how he believed that peace is possible, I was astonished to hear how he said that he loved English literature, and here's what really blew me away, he then proceeded to quote from the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers --  
That perches in the soul --  
And sings the tune without the words --  
And never stops -- at all --

While others might look for proof of God's power in the [carnage of retribution and revenge]; I look for how God is present in a Muslim man standing on a roof top and despite the devastating loss of his son and his olive trees, still, somehow speaks of hope.

And if Ibrahim can sing the song without the words and never stop at all, what right do I have not to be hopeful about the future?

Two stories on the redemptive power that can be found when we listen to that still small voice of conscience – Rami Elhanan and Ibrahim Khalil.

“Now,” David writes, “here is further illustration on how God is operative in the world.”

Rami and Ibrahim got to know each other through a community called “the Parents Circle.” These are Jews, Muslims and Christians who have lost loved ones in the violence but resolve to be together in a community of mutual support.

And those are not just empty words. When Rami learned of Ibrahim's tragedy, while nothing can bring back the child he had lost, Rami helped to organize an international effort to replant all 300 of Ibrahim's olive trees.

How is God operative in the world – 2 dead bulls and 450 dead prophets or the nobility and dignity of the human spirit, exemplified by Rami and Ibrahim?

And now we come to the last and most crucial question David intended for us today, a question God asked of Elijah twice...“What are you doing here?”

I suspect he puts this question to us because he knows for some religion, along with a host of other endeavors, is something people engage with to withdraw or insulate oneself from the world.

Is that what we're doing here? Hiding from the world?

David closes the sermon he prepared for us noting,

My wife and I were married in an Anglican church in Liverpool, England and I've always loved the words over the gate of that church, "Enter to worship; leave to serve."

He concludes,

As I see it, our places of worship have merit only if they help us through all the stages that Elijah went through in his journey toward Conscience. We are here to reimagine how God, (and I would add Goddess, that which affirms life...or our values, even), is present in the world.

This ever so troubled world, beset by so much violence and injustice, so much hate and fear is in need of those like Rami and Ibrahim, those who exemplify what it means to be a child of God, those who choose to listen to that still small voice present within themselves and so "sing the song without the words and never stop at all."

Amen [and Blessed Be].