

Save a Chair -- Proper 5C

An upstart, that's what he was. Elijah was the worst political entity of all, an upstart. You Marx Brothers fans will recall one of their most popular films – Duck Soup -- about the neighboring countries of Freedonia and Sylvania who get into all kinds of squabbles but are able to avoid armed conflict until Groucho calls Sylvanian Ambassador Trantino 'an upstart.' Trantino's response: "This means war!"

In a day and American age when political upstarts are not hard to find, we can forgive the Israelites for being a little dubious of Elijah's credentials, despite his overwhelming victory for over Baal and his priests and prophets. As far as King Ahab and Queen Jezebel are concerned, Elijah was very much an upstart, someone to be ridiculed and disposed of – if they could. Sometimes upstarts are not that easy to get rid of. Elijah was already in trouble with these two. He started his prophetic career by appearing before Ahab and declaring a punitive drought over all the land that only he, Elijah could relieve. Of course Ahab was livid, and wanted him killed for such effrontery, so Elijah had to take it on the lam, hiding out for several years before finally arriving at the climactic contest with the Baal prophets, a contest he handily wins.

Elijah is not your run of the mill outlaw. His ammunition is the power of The Lord. In these stories he is vetted, vindicated and validated as a true prophet of the truest God by performing miracles. For us his stories contain the same spiritual, historical and literary roots as

those told by followers of Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospel stories we tell today, especially those in Luke, are clearly indebted to Elijah for their theological impact: what makes them godly; for their entertainment value: what makes them enjoyable: and for their validity: what makes them ring true.

One might generalize by saying that the Hebrew Bible and its prophetic stories are about powerful signs that prove God is God, whereas the New Testament contains mostly stories about actions, the actions of faithful people that prove God is God. What is so singular about the Elijah stories, like those about Jesus, is that they comprise both signs and actions. In today's saga, Elijah spends quite awhile hiding out in the home of a widow. Off the radar, out of the limelight, he manages to stay safe from Ahab and Jezebel. But Elijah can't be idle, and the acts he performs are clear evidence that he has special powers and particular interests. The widow was chosen because she was close to the bottom of Ancient Near Eastern culture. If your dead husband's family couldn't or wouldn't protect and support you, you had no status in the community whatsoever, and were constantly in peril if you were a widow. This is the environment in which Elijah does his work – with the lowest and most marginalized segment of society. Next to lepers, widows were the weakest of the weak, the most fragile of the fragile, the lowest of the low.

Elijah gives her his entire attention too; he doesn't just hide in her house. They argue and bargain and make fun of one another, even as he is performing stunningly miraculous acts on her behalf. He is the prophet of the

poor. And when he finally gets into his contest with the Baal prophets, we have no doubt about the outcome. We know that his God will be better than theirs, because he is better than they are. Theirs is a magical, bloody, crazy god, his is one who gives full attention and compassion to the weakest, most vulnerable and innocent ones among us, as the psalmist said today: the widow, the orphan, the stranger.

Of course this is the God we seek to welcome and serve, and we tell these stories of Elijah to keep the nature and intention of God in mind. In Jewish homes, at the Passover Seder there is always left one chair empty, for Elijah to sit in in case we are fortunate enough to have him join us. We acknowledge our deep need to pay attention to him and the powers and priorities in his life. And we acknowledge our all-too-frequent need to be reminded of those qualities. At one point in the seder service, the front door of the house is opened, to symbolically welcome Elijah into the house; into the extra chair.

Is it any wonder then that when Luke sets out to provide spiritual, historical and literary substance to his stories about Jesus, he finds as many ways as he can to connect Elijah and Jesus as wonderworkers? What people remembered when Jesus first showed up, what interested them and amazed them and convinced them that he was of God were things he did that reminded them of Elijah and the other great ones. Remember Peter on the mountaintop: "Let's build three booths, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah!"

Feeding 5000, raising Lazarus, healing Jairus' daughter, and paying full attention to the marginalized widow, Jesus demonstrates that he knows what she is going through: the death of a loved one, not only that, but the death of a child, not only that, but the death sentence on herself that unprotected widowhood represented. Jesus knows, and like Elijah, gives her his full attention.

The word we translate as compassion evokes beautiful feelings in English, a sense of feeling with and for another person's body and soul at the same time. But check out the Greek word it translates from, also signifying intense inner emotion and sympathy: *splanchnizomai!* You don't get much better than that as words go, *splanchnizomai!* "Do you have any compassion for me?" "Do I have compassion? I don't just have compassion, my friend, I have *splanchnizomai* for you!" This word only appears twice more in the New Testament, that's how singular and rare the quality is. The Good Samaritan, has a strong feeling for the stranger bleeding in the ditch: Anybody? Right, *splanchnizomai!* The father of The Prodigal Son sees his laddie coming home over the hill and is filled with... you got it, *splanchnizomai!* And that's it. This is clearly a feeling we would do well to recognize and cultivate in ourselves.

There is a very touching song from the Civil War, about how a family feels when one son does not return from the fighting. This week, as we mourn the passing of a dear friend, we can surely relate to their emotion. They leave his chair empty at the dinner table, because he is there with them in spirit, if no longer in body. "*We shall meet, but we shall miss him, there will be one vacant chair. We shall linger*

to caress him, while we breathe our evening prayer.” As people who believe that the child of God was, and is, and is to come, we must keep in mind two things. One: We say to God: “...forasmuch as without Thee, we are unable to please Thee,’ which means we know we need God to live well – can’t do without her – and Two: We remember Jesus’ promise: “I am with you always, even unto the end of the age,” which means forever, forever – God will be with us.

This is especially true for the marginalized, the widow, the orphan, the stranger – the strange!, the prisoner, the poor, the undocumented, the dying, the odd duck in your mirror. But for any and all of us who think we aren’t part of any of those groups today, it is vital to know that we are then obliged to be living proof of Christ’s presence for all whom we encounter, especially the dispossessed. We are to be the self-fulfilling prophecy, the source of lovingkindness, compassion, yes *splonknizomai* for them and for each other every day in every way we can. As our Baptismal covenant reminds us, “We will with God’s help.” As we sing in our hymn, “Come thou long-expected Jesus.” Perhaps we ought to leave a vacant chair at some of our dinner tables once in awhile to remind us of those who are gone, or less fortunate, or insufficiently welcomed in our lives. Perhaps, once in awhile or every day, we ought to leave a splonk chair for Jesus.