

Pastor Roy's sermon from June 26, 2016

Courage (children) - What do dogs do when they are afraid? Bark, growl, bite. Cats—hiss, growl, scratch and bite—puppy pogo v. baby bopp. What do you do when you are afraid? What do you think adults do when we are afraid? (Friends, family, pray) What did Jesus do when he was afraid? What did his disciples do when they were afraid? Let's call down fire from heaven!

What do *we* do when we face danger, are anxious, afraid, unsure of how to overcome obstacles and challenges?

By the time Elijah taps Elisha to become the next lead prophet in Israel, he has already challenged the royal family and their religion. He stood up to the strongest in the land for their abuse of power and religion. The story we receive is that he defeated the prophets of Baal by calling fire from heaven to offer the sacrifice which the prophets of Baal were powerless to light. Elijah's name means "my God is Yahweh." This ancient story asks "Who is God?" Long after the time of Elijah, the story gets the attention of the Israelites, Jews and us by asking the question, "Who is God? And what does it mean to have faith?"

Struggle with other people groups, against nature, within our own communities, and selves has always been part of our story. We are inclined to control so we can feel safe and secure. But if we reflect, we realize that being in control leaves us permanently insecure and without joy, because our focus is control. A focus which is doomed to failure. We cannot control that which cannot be controlled! Faith brings joy and a greater sense of security because faith's focus is on trusting in all our relationships-- in the midst of the struggles and disappointments and insecurities. There is a big, big difference.

Elijah calls Elisha for discipleship in faith. Elisha will be the prophet when Elijah is no longer around. Elisha is trained not to be a king maker for some tribe, but to defend justice for common folks. He feeds the hungry, he heals the sick, he defends the poor. Elijah's faith is the difference between Yahweh and Baal and the other petty Canaanite deities. Elijah and Elisha seem to have rediscovered that when we struggle in faith with and for others, we are on the brink of joy, courage, and peace.

Here come Jesus and his followers passing through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem. They want to enter the village and stay for a time, but the villagers do not want them there. James and John respond with fervor, just tell us and we'll call down fire from heaven to consume them. Where did that come from? They would never had said that about a Jewish village. Ancient animosities die hard. James and John, without realizing it, want to take faith back to the mere exercise of power rather than justice and mercy.

Jesus rebukes them and they move on toward Jerusalem. Ultimately, he will demonstrate the Good News by giving his life, releasing his power to teach that the point of faith is not to be in control but to offer oneself in faith, for compassion, for love. He cannot preach this sermon. He must live this sermon and die this message. Jesus' Gospel echoes the message of Elijah and Elisha. Faith in God who gives courage to care for the least, to welcome the least. Joy comes from giving, not hoarding.

Those who learn the lesson of the Gospel to resist the temptation to live by power and control grow into a faith not purchased by violence or control. The freedom of the Gospel is true freedom. And when Jesus gave his life for this freedom, his resurrection is a sign that those who courageously live and die in love have found a life truly valuable and worth living. Love seeks justice and mercy rather than personal gain or security at all cost. And love sacrifices for the good of others, even strangers and enemies. For those who need enemies are lost and doomed to despair. Jesus calls us to the light of love. He calls us to have courage to grow in love. Let us release our power for the cause of mercy. Amen.