The Strings that Bind Us

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I Kings 19:1–4, 8–15a

Galatians 3:23–29

Luke 8:26–39

 “What in the world just happened here?” I’ve got to believe that something like this was going through Elijah’s mind in the Old Testament passage for today. Let’s back up a bit. In the passage immediately prior to today’s Old Testament reading Elijah had just won a contest over 450 prophets of the Canaanite storm god Baal. These prophets belonged to the wife of King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, who in addition to being an idolater was among the nastiest monarchs in Israel’s history, quite willing to steal, defraud, and even murder innocent people to get what she and her husband wanted. We shouldn’t be surprised at this, for if one is willing to ignore or disobey God, they’re probably not too concerned with the ways they treat other people.

I used to teach an introduction to Old Testament class regularly, and the story of Elijah’s contest on Mt. Carmel was one of my favorites. I remember one afternoon in particular; it was dark and rainy outside, with thunder rumbling in the distance. I had just finished reading aloud the conclusion to Elijah’s prayer in which he implored God to send fire down from heaven to light the burnt offering, “Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back,” when a bolt of lightning hit a tree just outside the window! I’m here to tell you, the students were impressed. To be honest, so was I. Every time after that when I told this story I would pause to see if it would happen again, but to no avail. *C’est la vie*.

Elijah had summoned Baal’s prophets to Mt. Carmel, a promontory overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, to determine who was truly God over Israel. Each side prepared a bull to sacrifice as a burnt offering, but then they were to call upon their god to set fire to the wood, a task shouldn’t have been too hard for Baal, whom the Canaanites proclaimed the lord of the thunderstorm. The prophets of Baal went first, taking the bull that was given them, preparing it, and then calling on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, “O Baal, answer us!” But the heavens gave no answer. At mid-day Elijah began to mock them, saying, “Cry aloud! Surely, he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” But after several hours nothing else transpired.

Now it was Elijah’s turn. He repaired the altar that had been torn down, using twelve stones representing the twelve tribes, arranged the wood on it and laid the bull on it. He then dug a trench around the altar, and soaked both the carcass of the animal and the wood with so much water that it overflowed into the trench. He then turned eyes and hands toward the heavens and cried out to the God of Abraham and Sarah, so that all would know that the Lord was God in Israel, that he was God’s servant, and that he did all these things at God’s bidding. The fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.”

Now, if this had been a story told by Hollywood in this style of, say, the first Star Wars movie, God would have seen to it that Elijah receive a triumphant celebration, complete with joyous music and medals--big, shiny medals. Instead, Elijah found himself public enemy number one, fleeing a death-sentence issued by the king’s wife. Now I ask you, was this any way for God to treat his prophet? As it turns out, maybe so.

There’s a story told about St. Teresa of Ávila, in which she was travelling to one of her convents. Along the way she was knocked off her donkey and fell into the mud, injuring her leg. “Lord,” she complained, “you couldn’t have picked a worse time for this to happen. Why would you let this happen?” And the response in prayer that she heard was, “That is how I treat all my friends.” Teresa answered, “That explains why you have so few friends!” It would seem that Elijah was learning the hard way what it can mean to be friends with God, as did most of the great figures in scripture.

Terrified, Elijah fled into the wilderness, where he was about to succumb to a fit of despair, asking God to take his life, but God, it would seem, had other plans, sending an angel to provide him with food and drink for the trek that lay ahead. He journeyed for forty days and nights further into the wilderness until he came to the very mountain where Moses had received the commandments from God that would, if the chosen people would but listen and learn, preserve them in the midst of a hostile and unpredictable world. This was a fitting destination for Elijah, for he had gone toe-to-toe with Jezebel’s prophets in defense of these commandments, the first stating that Israel was to have no other gods, and the second never to make or worship idols.

When God approached him on the mountain, he lamented that he alone had been zealous for the Lord, but the chosen people had ignored what Moses had taught them, and now he was caught in the crosshairs of the king and queen. If he was hoping that God would say, “That’ll do, prophet, that’ll do,” he was quickly learned otherwise. God sent him back into the fray, for there was more work to do, and oh, by the way, quit whining about being all by yourself, because there were seven thousand who had remained faithful to God and to the commandments that had been given on this mountain many generations previously.

Fast-forward now to what the apostle Paul writes to the churches in Galatia, what is now present-day Turkey. A controversy had erupted among these new Christian communities about the nature of the freedom they had in Christ and thereabout the same Law that Moses had delivered to Israel from the mountain and for which Elijah took on overwhelming odds and prevailed. The disagreement was not whether Christians should follow those commandments that draw our attention to those sensitive spots in our relations with one another—do not kill, care for orphans and widows, honor the inheritance of your ancestors, do not defraud or deceive—relationships that, if violated, undermine our ability to live peaceably together.

Many of these commandments find parallels in the common trust of human civilization, but there are some that set Israel apart in comparison to the nations that surrounded them. For example, God commanded them to love, not just their neighbors as themselves, but also the foreigner in their midst; the alien was not to be treated differently than their fellow Israelites. And though most of these commandments referred to specific actions—killing, adultery, sexual license, usury, fraud—the emphasis was on cultivating the kind of habits that would properly order their day-to-day relationships. Nowhere in the New Testament are we told that these commandments are no longer in force.

The controversy was instead that some were insisting that all believers, including non-Jews, should abide by the laws that remind the Jewish people of their identity as God’s chosen: Sabbath and other holy days, restrictions on which foods they could eat and how they were to be prepared, and especially circumcision. Paul is adamant; these laws once served an important purpose, but now that Christ has come, the discipline that the law had placed on them was set aside.

Upon hearing Paul’s announcement of the freedom we have in Christ, some may be tempted to sing with the classic Disney character of Pinocchio:

I’ve got no strings to hold me down,
To make me fret, or make me frown.
I had strings, but now I’m free
There are no strings on me…

I've got no strings so I have fun.
I'm not tied up to anyone.
They’ve got strings, but you can see
There are no strings on me.

Ah, but that’s not what Paul says about our freedom, which presupposes that in the faithfulness of Christ, a new creation had irrupted in the midst of the old, and as a result we know by faith that love and not hatred, peace and not enmity, and life and not death will have the final world. The Law of Moses had been a guardian or schoolmaster in preparation for the coming of the messiah. God calls us in Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit into new relationships and to take on new and sometimes hazardous tasks. By cultivating these relations and engaging in these tasks, we become participants in the coming of the triune God into this old, exhausted, violent world.

And so, with apologies to the beloved Disney puppet, there are in fact strings, gentle yet powerful, that accompany faith in Christ, cords of lovingkindness that bind us to God, to each other, and to our neighbors more tightly than anything commanded in the Law of Moses. The unity we have in Christ is a communion of love, a fellowship of being for each other and for our neighbors, and thus the freedom that is ours in Christ is never an opportunity for self-indulgence, but as Paul puts it, that we might become slaves to each other, as Christ does for us.

When we are baptized into Christ, Paul writes, we clothe ourselves with him, and thus are caught up in his way of relating to everyone we meet, which requires that we strip away the old habits and relations to which we became accustomed, and in their place a new set of habits--put on compassion, put on kindness, put on humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, generosity, forgiveness, self-control. And above all, we put on charity, for it is the love of God in the Word of God made flesh that binds everything together in a perfect harmony.

What being clothed with Christ looks like differs from person to person and from setting to setting. It need not be showy or heroic, but gentle and patient, and thus can be easily overlooked. For some putting on Christ looks like Jean Vanier, who, having witnessed the horrible plight suffered by adults with developmental disabilities while visiting psychiatric hospitals, was so convicted by what he saw, that he purchased a run-down house in a town outside of Paris so that he could share life with Rafael and Phillipe, two men whom he met in one of those hospitals, and from that point on dedicated the rest of his life to this mission, starting an organization that now spans the globe, with over 150 communities in 38 countries. In so doing, he discovered that in these who lacked power, God has given a precious gift that those of us who are able need.

Or putting on Christ might take on a more confrontational stance, such as we see in Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer. Mrs. Hamer labored in the cotton fields of Mississippi as a poor field hand for over forty years, but then became a storied figured in the civil rights movement; with the exception of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. she had no equal in the civil rights movement. From scripture and the testimonies of her church family she learned to see the world very differently, challenging what white Christians in Mississippi “knew” to be the case about their world.

Mrs. Hamer displayed her biblical imagination countless times, but none more eloquently than in a small church one Sunday morning in July 1964. Frustrated with the reluctance of the young pastor to support voter-registration efforts, she took advantage of his invitation to say a few words to the congregation to preach an impromptu sermon on the Bible passage for that morning from the book of Exodus: “And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and I will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the Lord their God” (29:45–46). According to witnesses, Mrs. Hamer majestically rose to her feet, her voice rolling through the chapel as she cited countless biblical figures in support of the cause of freedom. Her thunderous use of both the Old and New Testaments stunned the audience: “Pharaoh was in Sunflower County!” she cried, “Israel’s children were building bricks without straw—at three dollars a day!” Then she paused, her voice breaking and tears welling up in her eyes: “They’re tired! And they’re tired of being tired.” Mrs. Hamer fell silent for a moment, and then turned to point a trembling finger at the shaken young minister, and every eye turned to look at the pastor. Her voice was commanding: “And you, Reverend Tyler, must be Moses! Leadin’ your flock out of the chains and fetters of Egypt—takin’ them yourself to register—*tomorra*…!”

Or clothing oneself with Christ might resemble what the angel did for Elijah in the wilderness, providing food, drink, and shelter for those who, at grave risk, have journeyed far. Of course, some contend that such acts are illegal, and those who do them should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. These angels need to know that they are in good company, for they join the ranks of those who also violated human laws through love.

Next month, several of our fellow DaySpringers will make a pilgrimage to Assisi, Italy, the birthday place of St. Francis. When they get there, they will go to the place where Francis first heard God tell him to rebuild his church, and they will see the San Damiano cross in the Basilica of St. Clare of Assisi, one of his first followers and founder of her own religious order. But they will also have the opportunity to learn firsthand something of what being clothed in Christ looks like. In 1943 and 1944, approximately 300 Jews seeking to escape deportation to Nazi death camps made their way to that ancient city, and its inhabitants, at great risk to themselves from both the Germans and the Allies, responded with great generosity. Individuals and families were hidden in 26 monasteries and convents, some of which had been cloistered for centuries, as well in the bishop’s own residence, which was overflowing with Jewish refugees. When yet another family approached the bishop for a place to stay, he replied, “There is no room left except my bedroom and my office. However, I can sleep in my office. The bedroom is yours.”

In each of these cases, and in countless more, stripping off old habits and putting on kindness, compassion, wisdom, forbearance, and love did not happen in the moment. Clothing oneself with Christ takes a lifetime, starting with our baptism and continuing until the time we are summoned to be with him in his resurrection. Every day we meet those who are very much like the people he encountered and loved, such as the man driven mad by possession in our gospel passage; every day we have the opportunity to let the love of Christ reach them through us. Every day we can feed the hungry. Every day we can visit the sick and elderly. Every day we can bear wrongs done to us without responding, comfort those who grieve or suffer, counsel those overwhelmed by doubt.

But I should warn you, we need to be careful, for when we do these deeds in the name of Jesus we become friends with God, and in this old, violent, and tired world of ours being one of God’s friends may mean getting knocked off our donkeys from time to time.

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