

He Cannot Deny Himself (I Kings 16:29-17:1, 8-22; II Timothy 2:13; Luke 24:13-31)

The Israelites were suffering. They had been conquered by the Babylonians and carried off into exile, torn cruelly away from their homes, their families, and their way of living. They were depressed and disoriented. They sang a song of lamentation.

Charles Shultz once drew a cartoon in which Charlie Brown was at the beach carefully building a castle in the sand. Standing back to admire his work, he was soon engulfed by a downpour, which leveled his castle. Standing before the smooth place where his artwork had once stood, Charlie Brown said, "There must be a lesson here, but I don't know what it is."

As the suffering exiled Israelites stood back and looked at what they had lost, they too knew there had to be a lesson there. Scholars believe that First and Second Kings was written as that lesson to help the suffering Israelites understand what had led them to the sad place in which they found themselves.

Written as a single book, First and Second Kings reminded the exiled Israelites that hundreds of years earlier, when they were about to enter the Promised Land, Moses had told them, "I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But, if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

First and Second Kings reminded the exiled Israelites of the choices their ancestors had made in the Promised Land throughout the ensuing years, especially the years of the kings of the united kingdom and then the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel and in the southern kingdom of Judah. For the most part, the people had chosen to not walk in God's ways, to not observe his commandments. They had chosen to turn their hearts away from God and not listen to God. They had indeed allowed themselves to be led astray and thus bowed down to other gods and served them. And as a result, they had lost the land that the Lord had given them.

One example of their poor choices is found in our passage for today from Kings. As we read earlier in the service, the Israelite King Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of King Ethbaal of Sidon, a prominent Phoenician city. The royal couple then turned their backs on God, Yahweh. We don't know why. Maybe they found the assorted Phoenician gods more exciting than Yahweh. Maybe they were under social pressure. Maybe with more gods to worship, they could build more temples and shrines and thus flaunt their wealth. But whatever the reason, Ahab and Jezebel chose the Phoenician gods and practices over Yahweh and his commandments. They built an altar for the Phoenician god Baal in their new capital of Samaria, and they made a sacred pole to worship the Phoenician mother-goddess Asherah.

Yes, First and Second Kings gave a clear lesson to the Israelites suffering in exile. They had been conquered by the Babylonians and carried off into exile, torn cruelly away from their homes, their families, their way of living because their ancestors had chosen to worship idols instead of the true God. This explained why they were depressed and disoriented, singing a song of lamentation, singing "Our ancestors sinned; they are no more, and we bear their iniquities" (Lamentations 5:7).

We too bear the consequences of others, don't we? We know the frustration, the suffering, the anguish of those ancient Israelites sitting in exile in Babylon, hearing the lesson of what we now call First and Second Kings. So much of the burden we daily struggle under is because others sinned or made wrong choices, and we bear their iniquities.

Perhaps our parents chose to drink alcohol, and thus we never had the financial or psychological encouragement to go to college. Or, perhaps our

friends were not a good influence on us, and as a result, we still have legal issues weighing us down. Or maybe our spouse cheated on us, and we have a hard time trusting anyone now. The list could go on and on. Insurance companies set the rules for health care, and we can't afford insurance. A bunch of people we'll never meet made unethical, immoral decisions about money, and as a result, we lost our jobs and our financial investments. Yes, we understand the message of First and Second Kings. We understand that often times when others sin, when others make the wrong choices, we bear their iniquities, right?

So we "get" the word of warning in First and Second Kings. It's important that we make better choices than did these others who have caused us to suffer. It's important that we choose life and goodness--God's ways--God himself over current popular trends, ways of living, idols. For let there be no doubt: to turn our backs on God and his ways leads to suffering. Our decisions have consequences.

But there's another message for us in First and Second Kings. And it's a message of hope for us right here, right now, right where we're at, even if we're suffering as a result of what others or we ourselves have brought upon us.

For, immediately after our lesson for today talks about the evil of the times, the evil of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, there's a little story. In anger over the royals and the people turning their backs on him, God brought about a drought and then a famine. But even in the midst of his anger, God could not deny himself--God could not be other than he is--the God of love, even in his disappointment and anger, could not turn his back on those who needed his help.

And the Prophet Elijah needed God's help. Elijah felt alone. After all, it's lonesome to be God's prophet when everyone's turning their backs on God. Furthermore, Elijah, like everyone else, was hungry and thirsty. So God sent Elijah to a widow in Zarephath, and God instructed the widow to give Elijah what she had to eat. Thus God cared for Elijah.

But God also cared for the woman who helped Elijah, the poor woman who had lost her husband, and was struggling to keep her son and herself alive.

God saw to it that the widow and her son had plenty of food until the famine ended. And when the son became ill and died, God, through Elijah, even restored the young man's life.

The word of hope in First and Second Kings is that even in the midst of the suffering that comes to us in our lives, God is present to help us and to even breath new life into us. This is the same word of hope we find throughout our holy scripture. Just look at our gospel lesson for today.

The followers of Jesus felt as depressed and disoriented as the ancient exiled Israelites. Through no fault of their own, their whole world had been turned upside down. They had thought that Jesus was the messiah. But then the Jewish and Roman authorities had plotted and schemed and gotten rid of Jesus. As the two travelers walked toward Emmaus, they sang a song of lamentation. But suddenly, in the midst of their depression and disorientation, a stranger drew near, and their hearts began to burn within them, as the presence of the Lord gave them new hope, new life.

Stories of God's presence abound...for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear...for those who recognize God's presence in those he sends to help us in our time of need. For example, Howard Thurman shared the story of how dismayed he was in discovering that after all the fanfare about his going away to college, when he finally got to the railway station on his journey to Morehouse College, he did not have enough money to purchase a ticket. Too embarrassed to go home, he sat on the station stairs, sobbing uncontrollably. Suddenly a stranger appeared and asked him what he was crying about. "I don't have a ticket," said Thurman. "I'm supposed to be going to Morehouse College and now I can't go." "Oh heck," said the stranger. "I'll buy your ticket." Thurman never knew the man's name, but a moment of desolation was changed into consolation by a cigar-chomping railway worker who bought his ticket from Daytona Beach, Florida, to Atlanta, Georgia.

And then there was the woman who related the story of how she lost her job and was threatened with eviction. She was down to her last dollar and her children were hungry. Depressed and distraught, she seriously contemplated killing herself and her three children. She went to the mailbox thinking about how she would carry out her plan and suddenly found a check for five hundred dollars from an anonymous "friend" who had heard about

her plight through another friend. In her time of scarcity, in her suffering, God through an anonymous friend made a provision. She later found work and is now happily supporting her family.

Friends, right now, our lives may not be the way we want them to be, perhaps because we're suffering the consequences of what others have done, or perhaps because of our own poor choices, choices that no doubt have resulted in God's disappointment in us. But, as our epistle lesson for today points out, even "if we are faithless, he (God) remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself." Such a short epistle lesson, but such an important one for us to remember. "If we are faithless, he (God) remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself."

God's very nature is forgiveness, mercy, compassion, grace, love. Thus God comes to us in our need, at unexpected times, in unexpected ways to touch us, to encourage us, to heal us, to lift us from our depression and disorientation into new life. Look for him and his presence when walking down a lonely road to Emmaus, or when you feel in exile from all things good. Thanks be to our God who cannot deny himself. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; April 25, 2010