

One of the gifts of working our way through God's story as we've been doing this fall at Prince of Peace is that you begin to notice certain repeating patterns - things that happen over and over again. Those patterns are important to notice because they carry meaning. In fact, that's an important tool to put in your personal devotional toolbox. As you read the bible throughout the week, pay attention to repeating patterns. They often reveal important truths about God and about us. Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about, a pattern that we've seen over and over again in the past two months in the stories we've read in worship. Notice how often the Unlikely Heroes of the bible are forced to let go of what's familiar in order to embrace a deeper trust in God.

Adam and Eve leave the Garden of Eden to make their way in the world. Abraham and Sarah leave their home and journey toward a land that God hasn't even revealed to them yet. Joseph is forced from his home in Canaan and into slavery in Egypt. Moses leaves his pastures to confront Pharaoh. The Israelites leave the familiarity of Egyptian slavery and wander through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land.

In every one of those stories the Unlikely Heroes left behind what was familiar. And as they let go they found themselves in God's hand in a way that deepened their faith.

Today we're going to notice this very same pattern in the story of the prophet, Elijah. But before we read that story, let me fill in the gaps between last week and this week.

Last week Pastor Paul told us the story of David, the most celebrated king in Israelite history. David was a man after God's own heart. But unfortunately, many of the kings who came after David were not. Kings were supposed to

serve the people, but many of the kings of Israel served themselves. Kings were supposed to lead the nation of Israel to deeper worship of God, but many of the kings led the people to worship idols. Israel suffered through a lot of bad kings, but the "badest of the bad" was a king named Ahab. Listen to how Scripture describes Ahab, "He did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than any of the other kings of Israel before him" How would you like that on your resume?

Under Ahab's leadership the nation of Israel strayed far from God. But God never strays far from his people. God longed for the, wanted them to return to faithfulness. And so God sent a prophet, a man of faith named Elijah, to confront Ahab and to call the people back to faithfulness. And that's where our story today begins. Turn to 1 Kings 17:1-16 and let's read the story together. And as we read watch for that repeating pattern in Elijah's story, the pattern of letting go of what's familiar in order to experience a deeper trust in God. [READ OUT OF THE MESSAGE]

I admire Elijah for his courage in confronting Ahab. It's risky business to confront corrupt power and speak the truth. But did you catch what happened after that confrontation? First, God sent Elijah to the other side of the Jordan River, which put Elijah outside the borders of his home nation. Now Elijah is in a strange land. He's separated from family and friends and the things that were familiar. And he's dependent upon birds to feed him. Talk about letting go and being taken out of your "comfort zone".

But that's just the beginning. It gets even more uncomfortable and unfamiliar for Elijah. When Elijah's water source ran out because of the draught God sent him to a place called Zarephath where he'd be dependent upon a widow for his food. That's a really odd move for several reasons. First, Zarephath was enemy territory. It's the kind of place where a prophet could get killed. Zarephath was a dangerous place for Elijah. Second, Zarephath was dependent upon Israel for food. If there was a lack of food in Israel because of a draught, there was an even greater lack of food in Zarephath. And finally, the idea of depending upon a widow for food was absurd. In the ancient world widows always lived on the ragged edge of survival, but during a draught they were as good as dead. So God sends Elijah, the faithful prophet, into enemy territory so that he can be dependent upon a woman who has next to nothing. Talk about uncomfortable and unfamiliar! Why would God send Elijah into such a place? Because only when Elijah has let go of everything is he ready to hold a deeper trust in the God who will never let him go.

And why does this pattern get repeated over and over again in the biblical story? Because it's trying to tell us that the same pattern holds true for us. God meets us most profoundly when we come to the end of ourselves. When we have nothing left to hold onto we discover that we do not fall because we are held in the hands of a God who is faithful and able to provide. Jesus put it so beautifully in the first beatitude, "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule." (Matthew 5:3 MSG). This is the truth that the recovery community knows. Most often it isn't until people hit "rock bottom", when they come to the end of themselves, that they open to the transforming power of God to heal them.

Think about it this way. Imagine that this drawer represents my life. It's full of stuff. Stuff I like. Stuff I'm familiar with. Stuff that comforts me. Stuff that makes me feel good and secure. I can say that I want more faith, more trust in God, but there's no room for more faith. My drawer is full of "things" that I trust to keep me comfortable and secure. If I really want more faith, more trust in God, I need to empty my drawer to make room. I think that's what St. Paul meant when he said,

Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant.... I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. (Philippians 3:8-9 MSG)

As I think about my own life it seems to me that sometimes I've chosen to "dump the drawer" and sometimes the drawer seems to have been dumped for me. But either way, when I've found that when I've let go of what's familiar, when I've come to the end of my rope, God has been there in ways that deepened my faith.

I first came to faith when I left my home in Tucson, Arizona and became a student at the University of North Dakota, knowing almost no one. I didn't have much to hold onto. My "drawer" was pretty empty. But God met me there, and my life has never been the same.

When we discovered that our youngest son would require surgery for pancreatic tumors, I didn't have much to hold onto. My "drawer" was pretty empty. But God met me there and filled me with a peace that passed my ability to understand. And that experience deepened my trust in God.

I think about my first few years as a pastor here at Prince of Peace. We were drowning in debt, and just when we were beginning to catch our breath the challenging conversations around human sexuality and marriage equality began. Hundreds of people left Prince of Peace. There were a lot of days during that time when my drawer was empty, and some days when I thought seriously about moving my drawer to a new dresser! But looking back now I can see that it was during those times that God was shaping me for a deeper trust. Had things been easy I doubt I would have grown as much as I have.

Unlikely Heroes like Abraham and Joseph and David and Elijah had to let go of the familiar and comfortable. And when they did, when they came to the end of themselves, they discovered that God would never let them go. Those experiences shaped them and deepened their faith. And that same pattern is true for Unlikely Heroes like you and me. It may not be an easy journey, but it is a necessary one if we truly want to grow.

We have an opportunity this weekend to live into that very pattern, to let go, to empty our drawer in order to be filled with a deeper trust. And it's right here [hold up a commitment card]. In this culture nothing fills our drawer more, nothing entices us to hold more tightly for our security, than money. Stewardship is the practice of letting go of some of what we cling to so that we might learn to trust more deeply in God. Jesus put it this way, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:21) If you want to grow in trust and faith, if you want more of your heart to belong to God, then give some of your treasure to God and God's work in the world. Your heart will follow.

Turn back to the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 17. Underline verse 16, "The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah." The widow gave what she had, and God provided more. That doesn't make sense in the world's economy. But I have found it to be true in God's economy. I want you to test it for yourself. If you already give at Prince of Peace, increase your giving. Make a little more room in your drawer! And if you've never made a financial commitment here at Prince of Peace, it's time to start. Not because the church needs your money, but because you need to grow in faith. Let go. You'll find your heart full.