**6 Pentecost**

**June 26, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

In our readings this morning we hear an extraordinary story about the Prophet Elijah, and the prophet Elisha, whom Elijah mentored. And we also hear some rather confusing remarks from the mouth of Jesus. What do we, as people of faith, make of these in the context of the 21st Century?

In the First Book of Kings we heard the story of Elijah taking his mantle and striking the Jordan River and causing it to split two so that he and Elisha could walk across on dry land. Then the story tells us that Elijah was taken up to heaven in a chariot and a whirlwind. And, finally, that Elisha took the mantle that had been dropped by Elijah, and Elisha then struck the water of the Jordan River and it split so he could walk back to the other side on dry land. Now, I wonder, did this story happen the way it is told in the Bible? Anyone who had ever heard the story of Moses and the Exodus would recognize that Elijah and Elisha were now in the same company of God’s special people.

And then, in our reading from Luke’s gospel, we hear Jesus say things like: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." And: "Let the dead bury their own dead;” And: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." What are we to make of these words from Jesus’ mouth?

The magazine **Spirituality and Health** has a question and answer column by Rabbi Rami Shapiro called *Roadside Assistance for the Spiritual Traveler*. In a recent edition a reader wrote: “I’m having trouble accepting the Bible as the literal word of God. My pastor says I’m losing the Bible’s literal meaning. How do you handle literalism?”

In response, Rabbi Shapiro wrote: “Taking the Bible as the literal Word of God is not the same as taking the Bible literally. When Jesus says, “Let the dead bury the dead.” You may believe that Jesus literally spoke these words, but did Jesus mean them to be taken literally? Did he expect zombies to rise up to bury other dead people? Of course not; he is speaking metaphorically. If you believe the Bible is the literal Word of God, fine, but why go on from there and treat God as if she has the linguistic understanding of a five-year-old? To rob God and Jesus of the use of metaphor is to dumb them down beyond belief.”

Now, I have no fear that this congregation of St. Cyprian’s is going to read the Bible literally. My fear is that you may not read the Bible at all … just kidding. But with all the other churches in our community reading from the Bible … some reading it literally as the Word of God in one, and only one, particular translation of the Bible, with a very narrow interpretation of what this literal reading might mean … what is it that we, at St. Cyprian’s, say about our faith and the role of the Bible in it?

I, personally, consider myself to be a progressive Christian. Here is a brief history: In 1972 I went to Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia right outside Washington, DC. Every student in seminary affiliates themselves with an Episcopal Church in the area as their fieldwork parish. My fieldwork parish was St. Mark’s on Capitol Hill. The Rector of St. Mark’s was the Rev. James Rowe Adams, and Jim Adams and St. Mark’s did things differently … it was a creative and important learning experience. And, it was a place where my long hair, beard, sandals and jeans all fit in. In 1972 the term “progressive Christianity had not yet ben coined.

During my time at St. Mark’s, Capitol Hill Jim Adams and I formed a close relationship that lasted until his death a few years ago. When I became Rector of St. Mark’s in Toledo, Ohio I invited Jim to be the preacher at my installation service. Jim, had just formed The Center for Progressive Christianity … TCPC … at a time when the word “progressive” was still not often used with the word “Christianity.” Anyhow, Jim was telling me about some of the other churches that were supporting TCPC and mentioned that he was going to make a directory of “Progressive Christian” churches regardless of their denomination. A said, “Count me in!” His response was, “Good. You are the first in the Directory!” Since then The Center for Progressive Christianity has changed but I have always been a supporter, and I have used the term “Progressive Christian” to describe my understanding of my faith.

Now, for many years our ad in the Record said that St. Cyprian’s was a “progressive Christian community,” and our web site said the same. Many of you know that a contingent from St. Cyprian’s had a meeting with Bishop Howard a few months ago. A lot of issues were covered in that meeting, and one of them was “Progressive Christianity.” Bishop Howard told us that we were not to use “Progressive Christianity” because “Christianity does not require an adjective in front of it.” So we have removed the term from our weekly ad in the Record, and we have removed the link to The Center for Progressive Christianity from our web site and other material about St. Cyprian’s. Yet, I personally, believe I am a progressive Christian … a Christian who approaches his or her faith with a progressive mind and spirit.

However, let’s get back to our Bible readings this morning … and the question of literalism. Again, I consider myself to be a Christian who approaches my faith with a progressive mind and spirit … especially when it comes to Biblical literalism. I speak only for myself, not for the entire congregation, yet I know that there are a number of people who seem to agree with me in some of these matters. But, then, the question is “How does a Christian … especially a Christian who approaches his or her faith with a progressive mind and spirit … how does that person consider the Bible and how it is to be understood?

First of all, I believe that being a Christian who approaches his or her faith with a progressive mind and spirit … means that we are hearing the radical welcome of Jesus … as portrayed in the Gospels and seen in the early decades of the church … that this radical hospitality must encompass those who have been historically marginalized: women, LGBT people, and others due to race, ethnic or socio-economic factors. The Kingdom of God is both now and not yet, and I believe we must live and act as if we live in God’s Kingdom here and now.

Second, there is the way Christians who approaches their faith with a progressive mind and spirit approach the Biblical text itself. I, for one, take the Bible seriously … but I do not look at it literally. The Bible’s patriarchal language, its many contradictions in places, and its violent verses are all examples of the struggle of people of Biblical times to come to grips with what they knew to be Holy. Yet, I’m convinced that these issues cannot overshadow the larger themes in the Bible … the themes of justice, compassion and love. In and through this Book, we can sense the living Word calling us into a newness of life in the image of a loving and welcoming God.

I also believe that multiple voices are needed to help interpret these texts, and therefore voices from the margins need to have a seat at the table. For too long the voices of the disenfranchised have been ignored. What I mean by that is we need to include people other than just white, heterosexual, men, in the scholarly pursuit of Biblical interpretation. And, I also believe that other faith traditions have things to teach us which can help strengthen our own journey of faith.

As a self-proclaimed Christian, who approaches his faith with a progressive mind and spirit, I believe that the deep Biblical concerns for justice and hope need to be heard. The Bible is not just a book for personal piety, but an affirmation that everything belongs to God … each person, as well as the very earth we stand on, and the very air we breathe. This understanding of the Bible affirms the oneness of humanity and the sacredness of the whole created order. The political implications of how we must treat one another and the larger world are staggering. We need only look over our shoulder at the impending ecological disaster of climate change to understand our responsibility in protecting God’s Creation and all of God’s creatures in this generation and generations yet to come.

Finally, I feel that the last word has not yet been spoken. Our current understanding of the Biblical texts, our creeds and our liturgical formulations are not the last word. They may be helpful to a point, but God is calling us into the future. New light will continue to emerge as people of faith gather and affirm the ever-enlarging ‘beloved community.’

All of this, and more, stands in stark contrast to those who seek to limit God’s embracive love and whose actions or inactions lead to the abuse of the whole of creation in this generation with a profound impact for generations yet to come. Some people in our Episcopal Church and other mainline denominations … as well as those on the religious right … want to tighten things, build fences and draw circles to keep people out. I believe their actions simply are contrary to the development of the beloved community of God, and the Gospel of radical hospitality as exhibited by Jesus

I fully recognize that many may object to what Progressive Christianity stands for. My hope and prayer for them is that they have an expression of the faith of their own … and expression of Christianity that offers to them the same new and full life that my beliefs offer me. I am not so much concerned about converting others away from a faith that engages them and empowers their lives. But, I am interested in offering to those who are still spiritually seeking an alternative to a narrow and exclusive expression of Christianity.

The Bible is full of stories like that of Elijah and Elisha. We can either argue about the factual historicity of a literally understanding of the story, or we can choose to look at them as a way of telling people of faith about a greater Truth. I am not so much concerned about “Did it actually happen?” as “How do I know this story to be true in our lives today?”

The story of Elijah and Elisha was obviously intended to evoke the memory of the Exodus and Moses that all Jews would know from the annual Passover story. Telling a story this way is a form of what is called *midrash* … it is a way of telling the same story, just using different characters and a different setting. Think of the musical *West Side Story* as a retelling of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet.* As I mentioned before, the story of Elijah and Elisha is about giving those two prophet the credentials of special persons in the long saga of the Israelites relationship with God … just like the special person Moses who split the Red Sea.

And the sayings of Jesus? If one looks at all of them literally one ends struggling with contradictions and unanswerable questions. However, if we look at them metaphorically they open for us a way to see them as valuable to our own faith journey today … just as they were to those who heard them from the mouth of Jesus the first time they were said.

Our Christian faith is big enough for many expressions, and lots of different translations, and countless understandings. This isn’t about which one is right or wrong. It is about finding an expression of faith … an understanding of the biblical texts … that leads to a fullness of life in God’s image. I, for one, consider myself a Christian who approaches my faith with a progressive mind and spirit. This leads me to seek a better world … with radical hospitality, a place at the table for all of God’s children, and loving justice for all of God’s Creation.

Amen.