

I Kings 19:9-18; Acts 11:27-12:3a; Mark 10:35-45

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Professor Trelawney, introduced to Harry Potter fans in the third book of the series, is, on the one hand, boring to Harry and his friends Ron and Hermione, and, on the other hand, rather amusing. She is the professor of Divination at the Hogwarts School of Wizardry. She instructs students in the magical art of prediction and prophecy. For example, Professor Trelawney teaches them how to scrutinize tea leaves at the bottoms of their cups, and how to interpret the lines running across their palms, in order to foretell what is to come. I confess I would find her both boring and amusing as well. I had a Ouija Board when I was a child, and the hickey-jigger our hands rested upon never moved by itself except when we urged it in a particular direction or the cat jumped up on the board to investigate what we were doing. I owned a Magic 8 Ball, and I would ask it questions, then turn it over, and the hickey-jigger floating in fluid inside it would flip and reveal “Yes” or “No” or “Maybe” even when I asked the same question repeatedly. And one memorable horoscope for Sagittarians such as I purported to tell me what I would be like when I grew up. It said (and I quote) “You will be tall and fond of outdoor sports.”

I suppose there are times when we wish we could predict the future. It might be helpful to know some things, that we could be better prepared. Or, if we learn the outcome we desire is indeed going to be achieved, it might reinforce our present course of action.

In our Gospel lesson today, James and John wanted to predict their future. In fact, the two Sons of Zebedee, among the first disciples called by Jesus, wanted to **dictate** their future. They wanted seats of honor beside their Lord Jesus when he came into his glory. And who wouldn't? Such an honor would be wonderful. Knowing about it ahead of time would be wonderful, too. Plus, if they knew the desired outcome could be achieved, wouldn't it simply reinforce their present course of action, which was following this Jesus? What harm was it in getting a little insider knowledge? (Well, just ask Martha Stewart, whose insider knowledge is giving her five months in prison . . .)

Then there was the prophet Elijah in our Old Testament lesson. He was hiding out in a cave for fear of the wrath of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, whom he had prophesied against. Unlike James and John, he didn't make a request regarding his future. He figured there **was** no future. He was certain he was the last of the faithful, the sole worshiper of the Lord God remaining in Israel, and that the wicked ones were now seeking to take his life. If that was to be his outcome, then Elijah may just as well sit dejected and despondent in his cave, waiting for the end. There seemed to be little point in continuing the course of action to which he was originally called—that of being a prophet of the Lord. Elijah was feeling so sorry for himself in that cave that the Lord God's first response went by him completely. The Lord God made his presence known,

with the noise and power of mountain-splitting wind and earthquake and fire, all intended to get Elijah's attention. Elijah could have cared less. It was only the silence that followed the pyrotechnics, and the voice that came out of that silence which finally drew Elijah out of the cave. Oh, Elijah's despair was still there. For him, nothing about his future had changed. But now he was ready to listen to the voice of God. In our lessons, Elijah and James and John all waited for a response.

In neither lesson was the divine response very sympathetic. No warm fuzzies were dispensed here. Wishes were not granted. Maybe that was for the best. After all, James' and John's request was not unlike the childish strategy used to manipulate moms and dads: "Promise me you'll give me whatever I ask." Those of us who are parents know full well what would happen if we caved in under such manipulation. We'd all be reduced to giving our kids ponies at Christmas and ice cream for supper. No—Jesus would not act on James' and John's request. And he wouldn't predict their future. In fact—we learn something very interesting here—Jesus couldn't fulfill their request. He declared it was not his to grant. Jesus deferred to his heavenly Father on this one. In fact, Jesus didn't give any particular words of comfort on the matter. Instead he said, do you realize what you're asking? Are you able to drink the cup I'm drinking and be baptized like I'm being baptized? See, Jesus might not have known the specifics of their future, but he knew what was ahead for him. Jesus **had** made a prediction. He had predicted his own suffering and death. Three times in Mark so far, Jesus plainly told his disciples what was going to happen to him. An awful lot was set to happen before there'd be any seat in glory, so there was little use in daydreaming about it. Jesus chose to concentrate, not on seats in glory, but this—that there was a purpose to his life. Jesus understood his life to be one of faithfulness to his Father and service to others in need. His death would be service as well. In that ultimate outpouring of his life as he died on that cross, he would purchase freedom for people held captive by sin, people penned in by the fear that there was no future. Knowing the divine purpose of his own life and death, Jesus recognized that those who followed him, who drank his cup, who were baptized in his baptism, would have a divine purpose, too. The purpose for their lives would parallel his purpose, move in the same direction. That purpose is lives of faithfulness to God and service to others in need. Such serving has the potential to free those held captive by sin. Such serving has the potential to bring hope to those without. Serving others, said Jesus, is the mark of true greatness, but it is not taken up without difficulty, and is not without cost.

And what was the Lord God's response to Elijah? Basically, he told the prophet to get back to work. He gave a new commission to Elijah—to anoint kings as rulers over Aram and Israel, and anoint Elisha as a fellow prophet. God didn't say the work would be without difficulty or without cost. But he did make **one** promise about the future. Elijah would find that there was, indeed, a faithful remnant in Israel: 7,000 people who would not worship any false gods. Elijah would not be alone.

Do we really want to know what's going to happen to us in the future? Knowing the situations ahead of time might be for some an opportunity to prepare, but for others of us, knowing these situations ahead of time might make us face the future with dread.

Personally, I don't want to know things ahead of time—not the specifics, anyway. What Jesus gave to James and John was not specifics, but the truth behind the specifics: Following Jesus and serving in his name will bring us into situations that require of us the very best we can give, and demand of us qualities we don't think we possess, and ask us to do things we never thought we could do, and call on us to trust our Lord to lead us through it all. What the Lord God gave Elijah was not specifics, but the truth behind the specifics: God will not forsake his people, and we will never be alone.

Some of you learned that once again just a few weeks ago. A number of our members here were at Camp Nawakwa for Family Camp two weeks ago when 14-year-old Amanda Henderson had a serious bicycle accident on a road leading to Gettysburg. It came totally unexpected. No one could have predicted it. She is recovering wonderfully, and we give thanks to God for that. But there is more for which we thank God. The response of campers and staff to that accident was God-driven and God-graced. There were those who remained with Amanda at the accident site, caring for her until medical help could arrive. There were those who rushed back to Nawakwa to reach other family members and get vehicles. Someone had the presence of mind to grab suitcases from the Henderson family cabin, realizing they might need clothing and other items if they would be at Hershey Medical over any length of time. Some folks suddenly found themselves enlisted as instant chauffeurs, winding their way to the hospital over the country roads and through traffic as safely as possible and yet as quickly as possible, in order to reach Hershey not long behind the helicopter and Amanda. Some folks sat at the hospital and waited with the Hendersons, that terrible waiting, until the results of CAT scans were available. Back at camp, some folks took Amanda's sister Emily under their wing, easing her hours of worry. Over the next few days, there were those who came to the hospital and surrounded Amanda and her mother, Barb, with great love. At the same time, there were those remaining at camp who surrounded father Dan and Emily with great love, too. And everyone, when they weren't quite certain what to do, prayed that Amanda would be well.

Could non-Christians do such things? Of course. History has shown that people of various faiths, and even those without faith in God, have done extraordinary things in response to crises. So, what makes this situation different? Well, for one, the people involved **knew** that the compassion and care demonstrated was God-driven and God-graced. The people involved knew that without God present to strengthen each and every one of them, each and every one of them could not do what they needed to do. The people involved **had** to place their trust in the Lord God, not in themselves, and ask **him** to lead them through it all. Perhaps most important of all, the people involved understood themselves as truly connected to one another in a bond of love only made possible by God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. See, we are the Church, a mysterious and amazing fellowship where we are no longer alone, no longer isolated from one another, but have been made, through our baptism into Christ, brothers and sisters of one another. And brothers and sisters of Christ himself. Brothers and sisters demonstrating lives of faithfulness to God and service to others in need, in the most unexpected of moments. Our lives have purpose, divine purpose, paralleling the purposeful life of our Lord Jesus. AMEN.

Copyright © 2004, Nancy R. Easton. All rights reserved.