

I Kings 19:9-18; Mark 10:35-45

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

So a couple of weeks ago, my oldest son called me from camp and said, "Dad, guess what! We had a snake in our cabin." "Oh really?!" I said. "Oh yea, it was in my room. I got up during the night to go to the bathroom and there it was and so I went and got Mom. And I said, 'Mom, there is a snake in my room.' And she came in my room and I said, 'you see that stick?' And she said 'yea,' cause she was still asleep. And I said, 'that's not a stick, Mom.'" Apparently a snake had gotten into the cabin and had curled itself up and was sitting there on the bookshelf. Marianne caught the snake, after much commotion, and threw it outside, and had a very exciting morning telling everyone about this Black snake that was in the cabin. Well, two days later the snake was back. This time Marianne got the maintenance guys to catch the snake. They took it all the way out to the sewage pond.

Marianne is far more gracious than I am because I would have killed the snake the first time I would have seen it. I guess of all the kinds of snakes that you can possibly have in your living area, a Black snake is probably one of the best. Black snakes eat rodents. They eat the little critters that you don't want in your house: the mice; the rats; whatever. Now to me, Black snakes are fine creatures as long as their OUTSIDE of the house. Maybe over in the barn or behind the garage, but not - especially NOT - in my sleeping area. So now I have developed a habit, of whenever I go in the bathroom, of looking up. Because there are certain things that I have to do in the bathroom and I don't want a snake falling on me when I am doing those things.

But the whole experience helped me to realize that we tend to not think three dimensionally. We tend to only look at things around us, or in front of us, or if we're driving a car, occasionally behind us. But we don't always think to think to look up. And I think that's what both Elijah and James have in common in our lessons tonight. They need to think three dimensionally: they need to look at the whole picture.

In the lesson that we head, Elijah's just coming down off of this really great high. He had been up against the 450 prophets of Ba'al; they had had this contest whose god can light the altar. And the prophets of Ba'al had prayed and scampered about and didn't even get a spark on the dry wood for their altar. But Elijah soaked the wood on the altar that he had built for YHWH. He soaked the wood seven times and he placed twelve stones around the altar and he prayed to God that God would make this wonderful example, and BAM, this bolt of lightning comes down. It incinerates the altar, it melts the stones, it's an amazing show of force, it's an amazing show of power. The people rise up in rejoicing about God and they slaughter the prophets of Ba'al. Elijah then goes on to pray to God to break the drought that has been upon the land for three and one-half years. Well, these are, on the one hand very wonderful things, but it gets King Ahab and his wife Jezebel very ticked off at Elijah for showing this power because they had

been busy setting up these altars for Ba'al all over Israel. And so Jezebel puts this price on Elijah's head. He runs off into the desert because even though he has seen the power of God, he is afraid of Queen Jezebel. He runs off and he hides himself in a cave and God finds him there in the cave, and says, "Elijah, what's going on?" And Elijah, I've got to say, is a whiner. Because Elijah goes, "I've been very zealous for the LORD the God of Hosts for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, killed your prophets with the sword, I alone am left and they are seeking my life to take it away." Well, this response really ticks off God, and so God does this wonderful thing, it's called a Theophany (that means the "manifestation of God"). We see God showing the power of the Almighty in the wind, in the earthquake, in the fire. But in none of those is God. Elijah's still hiding out in the cave and it is not until as we heard in our translation tonight, the "sound of sheer silence" or some of you might remember the King James Version, "a still small voice." The whole idea of that phrase is that the sound that followed - or lack of sound - was so unique, that's what finally drew Elijah out of his cave. He came to the entrance, and once he is outside of the cave God says to him again, "Elijah, what's the deal, what's going on?" And Elijah again whines, "Oh Lord, everybody's after me and nobody in this whole land has, I alone am left of everyone in this whole land to worship you." And God says to Elijah (and this is my paraphrase), "Would you grow up? YOU HAVE A JOB TO DO. I don't care whether you're happy. I don't care if you're having fun. You have a job to do. Besides, there are 7,000 who have not yet knelt down to worship Ba'al." Elijah was so wrapped up in his own self-centeredness that he failed to see around him all that God was accomplishing.

I think it was similar with James and his brother John. Now James and John, they are two-thirds of the inner circle with Jesus, the final part being Peter. James and John approach Jesus with a request. First, though (they're very sneaky about this) FIRST they say to him, "Jesus, we want to ask you something, but you have to agree that you are going to say yes first, before we ask you." And Jesus, who is a whole lot smarter than James and John, says, "What is it that you want to know?" And so they say, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left in all of your glory." And Jesus gives the loving response, "NO. You can't do that, you don't know what you're asking." "Oh yes we do Lord, yes we do." "No, no, you don't. Yes, you WILL share in the things that I will share, but it is not mine to grant who sits on my left and on my right."

Because James and John were looking for this military messiah, a religious general, who was going to lead the people of Israel into battle against Rome, against the Greeks, against everyone who stood between them and God. Or at least everyone that they PERCEIVED stood between them and their own religious and national freedom. But all three of them, Elijah and James and John, they weren't thinking three dimensionally, they weren't looking at the bigger picture. They were just looking at themselves. They said "what's in it for me?" What can God do for me, instead of, in echos of our late president JFK, asking "what can I do for God?"

What can I do for God? Well now, both James and Elijah went on to do more in their ministry. James, after this event, was with Jesus on the mountain top of the transfiguration. He saw Jesus standing there with two other people that they assumed were Elijah and Moses. James was with Jesus at the Last Supper, and fell asleep there in the Garden as Jesus prayed right before he was arrested. He watched the crucifixion. More importantly, he beheld of the risen Christ, went on to lead the church in Jerusalem, and was the first of all the apostles to be martyred.

Elijah too went on in ministry. He did get Elisha to replace him. He pronounced doom on King Ahab, and on Ahab's son who followed him, and he was taken away in that great chariot of fire. But all too often I think that I, and probably most of us, don't look at the bigger picture either. We get focused on our own finances, while vital ministries struggle and people in our own communities lose their homes, their cars or their self respect because they are in financial straits. We zero in on our own health, or the health of our immediate family, and don't see the poor coloring of that coworker whom we don't like, or the poorly dressed fellow sitting out on the park bench. We feel all alone in our struggles, in our daily living, without ever reaching out to those who are standing there with open arms. And so often while God stands before us, we ignore God.

Dr. Rick Carlson, one of the professors at Gettysburg seminary, wrote this about Elijah at this point in his ministry: "God does not buy Elijah's self-pitying, his excuses or his assessment of the situation. Instead, God recommissions Elijah for a new stage in his prophetic ministry while also letting Elijah know that he is not God's last great hope. Whereas Elijah went into hiding because he was threatened by an enemy, God calls him to be the vanguard of a movement in which God will decimate those enemies. Whereas Elijah saw his leadership in isolation, God calls him to anoint new political and religious leaders. Whereas Elijah considers himself the last loyal worshiper, God informs him that there over 7,000 loyal worshipers. Whereas Elijah was bringing his ministry to an abrupt end through self-absorbed outlook and attitude, God calls Elijah out of himself and into a whole new direction of ministry through which God's goals and purposes will be accomplished. (New Proclamation Year C, 2004 p 154)

We, like James, like Elijah, all too often get caught up in ourselves. But we, like James, like Elijah, we are called to ministry. We are called through our baptism. We are called through the word. We are called through the bread and wine. We are called to think three dimensional, think about the big picture.

Closing comment concerning the snake in the cabin: So after the second incident, the maintenance guys came to the cabin, and figured out that the snake must be coming in through the closet that houses the water heater. They covered up any little hole that they could see around the water closet, then took spray foam and sprayed it into the nooks and crannies that they couldn't put a piece of wood over. The good news is they haven't seen another snake inside the cabin since. But how did they find those holes? They had to look up. Three dimensional thinking. It is not just what is in front of us. It's not just what is around us, or behind us. It includes what is above us. And so we remember we need to Look Up.

Amen.