

Taking off the Training Wheels

Time after Pentecost, Lectionary 19
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

I Kings 19:9-18; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

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

Walking around our neighborhood streets on a summer's evening is a relaxing pastime for my husband Randy and me. We talk over the day's events together, while getting fresh air and exercise. We greet neighbors and friends along the way. And we witness the summer ritual of younger families from street to street, who are teaching their children to ride a two-wheeler. Can you picture the process? The child, head encased in a big protective helmet, wobbling and weaving down the street, the parent jogging behind or beside, sometimes huffing and puffing, invariably shouting commands: "There you go—straighten the wheels. Slow down. Okay, pedal faster now. Watch out—don't hit the curb! Remember how to put on your brake? Stop. Stop. STOP!"

I confess that I was a tentative child in many things, and learned to ride a bike much later than most children. So tentative that I could not bear even to get started. There I was, at the back wall of our empty garage, standing over my bicycle, one foot on a concrete block, and my goal was to push off that block with my foot, propel myself forward, and start pedaling. Couldn't do it. Wouldn't do it. My parents, after a long frustrating weekend of trying to help me learn, dropped the matter. My brother gave up as well. There I was, left alone in the cool darkness of the garage with my thoughts and my anxieties. But you know, ironically, I was kind-of content in there. Safe, too. Might have remained there for days, foot poised on the cement block, had not my friend from across the street, Mary Jo Quattrone, patiently stayed with me and encouraged me. I did eventually learned how to ride a bike . . . and without training wheels.

As our first lesson opens up this morning, Elijah, a prophet of the Lord God, huddles in the cool darkness of a cave on Mt. Horeb. Like me in my garage, he has half a mind just to stay there awhile. It's quiet. It's safe. After all, he's been on the run for forty days. See, so successful was he in serving the Lord God as his prophet in Israel, that he kindled the wrath of Queen Jezebel and King Ahaz. To make a long story short, Elijah out-prophesied 450 other prophets in a contest. It was basically a contest about whose god was bigger and better and real. These other 450 were Jezebel's prophets, and represented Baal, the false god Jezebel worshiped. So successful was Elijah in serving the Lord God as his prophet that those 450 false prophets died. Thus, King Ahaz and Queen Jezebel are out to get him. That's what you get for being a faithful prophet! That's what you get for doing your job! Better to hide in a cave somewhere till things cool down. In fact, it could be a good long time before Elijah ventures out again. It's a dangerous world out there for a person called to follow God's ways.

It **is** a dangerous world for a person called to follow God's ways. I don't mean that you and I face the potential of persecution or the threat of death, as Elijah did. There **is** persecution going on in places around our world and persons of faith are being singled out, but not so much in our

own nation. That doesn't, however, mean we don't face danger or difficulty. See, it's easy to be a Christian in this place. Coming to worship and being involved in aspects of institutional church life is being a Christian, only with training wheels. For all its problems (and don't get me wrong—some churches are highly dysfunctional and destructive in their actions), congregational life for the most part is pretty easy, pretty safe. We're not afraid of sounding like Christ-followers; we're not reluctant to act like Jesus is our Lord. In here.

Now, **out there** is a different story. Being a follower of Christ out there is often like the first time you rode your two-wheeler without training wheels. You wobble and weave and overcompensate on the steering. Your heart pounds, you see the curb up ahead and all you can hope is that you land on something with a little cushioning.

It is hard to follow God's path out there. Be it in our workplace, with our group of friends, in our home, in our participation in community life, in situations involving our financial or physical or mental health—on a daily basis we struggle to ride that bike faithfully, loving God, loving our neighbor, serving and giving.

We struggle, for every day you and I are confronted with moral and ethical choices, those forks in the road that lead you in two completely different directions. Sometimes the choices are black and white—pretty clear what a Christian response, a faithful response should be—but just because we have some ethical clarity doesn't make it any **easier** for us to do the right thing. For in our human sinfulness we sometimes choose the exact wrong thing . . . even when we know it's wrong. Then the rest of the time? The choices are shades of gray, not black and white, and we agonize over the appropriate course of action. We sit and stew, and lose a lot of sleep, and chug a lot of Maalox as we try to do what's best. And from one minute to the next, what's best seems to change.

Then, talk about the curb looming up ahead . . . There are those things we hit with our front tire, the things we never saw coming, and we are sent headlong over the handlebars. They knock the wind out of us. Aren't there simply events in life over which we have absolutely no control? And we begin to feel as if we're spinning out of control? Makes you just want to hide out in the back of the garage . . . or a cave, for that matter.

The trouble with Elijah is that, besides hiding out from Jezebel and Ahaz, he's also ultimately hiding out from God. He can be no prophet of the Lord in the back of the cave. You and I cannot be the Body of Christ in this world in the fullness Christ intended if we stay here and only do this. Or if we're paralyzed with fear, and so tentative as never to act in his name out there.

The Lord God calls Elijah out of the cool, dark cave. You gotta love the way it's recorded in I Kings. The Lord God said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" I won't pretend to know what emotion was involved in that question, but I know as a mother how I might ask such a thing, rolling my eyeballs, arms akimbo. **What** are you doing here? What are you **doing** here? What are you doing **here**? The Lord God promises to pass by the cave's opening, and in the midst of the most quiet, silent moment after storm and wind and a cacophony of noise, slowly, tentatively, Elijah comes out and stands before the Lord. Once again, the Lord asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah's awfully defensive at first, quick to say, "I'm the only one who has

remained true to you. There's no one left but me. And Jezebel's going to have my head, so I'm thinking of staying here awhile."

The Lord God will have none of that. In fact, the Lord God proceeds to inform Elijah just what his tasks are going to be. The Lord God is sending him out again, and Elijah's going to anoint other prophets. He's going to anoint other kings and leaders. Those prophets and kings and leaders will be faithful. Not to mention the 7,000 other folks who live in Israel who will not bow down to any false god. What makes you think you're all alone, Elijah?

That's a real eye-opener for the prophet. He had convinced himself in his fear that he was all alone. But the Lord God would not let him think or believe he was all alone. The Lord God would not let him stay there in that cave. The Lord God would go with him the rest of the journey, however long that journey, however difficult the way. And the Lord God would create faith in others, who would join Elijah in worshiping God. Simply put, Elijah belonged out there, walking the Lord's path, doing his work.

That passage connects so well with our Gospel lesson, doesn't it? The disciples are as fearful in the well of that boat, tossed about in the storm, as Elijah was in his own contemplation of his upcoming obituary at the hands of Jezebel. And at the moment where the storm was greatest, the disciples' fear most paralyzing, their cries most insistent, their Lord Jesus passed before them on the water. He would not let them think or believe for one moment that they were all alone. He would be with them through the storm. In fact, he was the only one who could still the storm. And Jesus would go with them the rest of the journey, however long, however difficult. Of course, they had yet to figure out just how difficult a journey it would be for their teacher, who would even take on a cross for them.

But this is the upshot for both the prophet Elijah, and, hundreds of years later, those 12 disciples: **They would not be able to wait for circumstances to be ideal before stepping out of the cave or stepping out on the water.** Look, how long could I stay in the back of my darkened garage? Was my two-wheeler going to move all by itself? Wouldn't I want someday to eat dinner or go to bed? The rough sections in our driveway were never going to go away, and Spruce Street, the street on which I lived, sloped downhill precipitously. I would have to learn how to use the brakes and steer properly. My knees would always have tender skin on them, and in my day and age, there were no helmets to wear.

It's the same for our daily walk. We can't wait for circumstances to be ideal in our lives before stepping out and living the Christian life. We're simply going to have to go out there without training wheels. As we live out our lives in faith, it will have to be enough to know that Jesus is present with us now and he promises he will journey with us always. It will have to be enough to know that Christ's worldwide Church means there are thousands, millions who share our trust in and love of God—even as they face their own storms and fears. We may, at times, wobble and weave, but Jesus, the Lord of heaven and earth, is ultimately in control of chaos and storm and anything, **anything** that dares to strike fear in our hearts. **AMEN.**

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