

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 12, 2018
1 Kings 19:1-8
“Two Messengers Contending”

We live in a good news, bad news sort of world. This fact has even given rise to a series of good news/bad news jokes. The doctor comes in and says, “Well, I’ve got good news and I’ve got bad news.” The patient responds: “Okay, well, give me the good news first.” The doctor reports, “You have 24 hours to live.” The shocked patient gasps, “24 hours...how is that the good news?” The doctor concludes, “I’ve been trying to call you since yesterday.” You’ve probably heard that one before but it serves our purpose well for today.

You know how life goes. You’re going along doing your best and then you get the good news, a baby is born, you’ve won a drawing somewhere, you have received a windfall of cash. And then you begin to wonder. You wait with baited breath for the next shoe to drop. Because you know it’s going to happen. Every time something good happens it seems like something bad is not far behind.

Good and bad. Life and death. Plenty and want. Our world seems to be made up of this dualistic structure. In fact, God has so designed our world. That is not to say that God created bad/evil, death, or want mind you. No God didn’t create sin which brought all these things into creation but He does use these things in order to accomplish His purpose which is that His people seek the way that leads to life. This is what we see as we travel back to the time of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel in our Old Testament lesson for this morning.

It is after David and Solomon have both died. The kingdom of Israel has been split into North and South. King Ahab is king of Israel, the northern kingdom. And he is a bad king. In fact, the author of the books of Kings says: “And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of Yahweh, more than all who were before him. And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshipped him. He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke Yahweh, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him” (1 Kings 16:30-33). So the biblical account makes it clear that Ahab is a bad king, the worst king and yet Yahweh did not make him a bad king. Ahab freely chose to depart from the way of Yahweh to worship his wife’s gods Baal and Asherah.

And Yahweh even went so far as to try to call Ahab to repentance by sending His prophet Elijah to him. When Elijah comes the first time he announces to Ahab that it will not rain again until Elijah calls down the rain. Then after three long years of famine Elijah comes again to announce that it will rain and so he meets Ahab. He then has Ahab gather all the people of Israel and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah. Of course, you remember what happens next. Elijah slaughters all the false prophets of Baal and Asherah. Afterwards Yahweh sends rains again.

All this is what causes Jezebel to be so angry with Elijah. It is her anger which is driving the events in our text for today. Ahab reports to his wife what Yahweh has done through Elijah, specifically how he orchestrated the slaughter of the false prophets. This prompts Jezebel to send a messenger to Elijah who reports the queen's words. "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of [the prophets] by this time tomorrow" (1 Kings 19:2). In other words, Jezebel is threatening to take the life of Yahweh's prophet, Elijah. Understandably Elijah is afraid so he flees to the south, to Beersheba in the southern kingdom of Judah.

When he finds himself all alone in the wilderness he finds a single broom tree under which he seeks rest. And while he is there he prays that Yahweh would take his life. And he sleeps. His sleep however is disturbed when a messenger of Yahweh comes and wakes him so that he may eat and drink. Elijah eats and drinks and then goes back to sleep. The messenger of Yahweh however shakes Elijah into consciousness again, feeds him again, and sends him on his way. Elijah so strengthened by the angelic food travels forty days and forty nights to Mount Horeb which is also known as Mount Sinai where he encounters Yahweh Himself in that still small voice.

So notice that in our text there are two messengers contending for Elijah. The first messenger, the one from Queen Jezebel, is a messenger of death and desolation. That is the messenger that drives Elijah to fear and despair. The second messenger, the one from Yahweh, is a messenger of life and provision. This is the one that enables Elijah to go forty days and forty nights to the mountain of Yahweh where he encounters the creator of heaven and earth and is reengaged in his prophetic ministry until Yahweh snatches him up into heaven never granting his request to take his life.

Two messengers. Two very different messages. And they contend with one another. Death contends with life. Desolation contends with provision. And they contend with one another battling for keeps. If one goes with the messenger of death he dies forever. If one heeds the messenger of life he lives forever.

Make no mistake though. The messenger of death and desolation does not come with a clear message. He will not come and say, "If you follow me you will suffer death forever without end." No, this messenger has to make his message appealing so that it seems as if his is the better way, the easier way, the way leading to lasting happiness.

We see this most clearly when the two messages contend with one another in the history of our Lord. Jesus Himself faced two very different messengers when He was tempted in the wilderness forty days and forty nights. The messenger of death and desolation came offering Him a way that he promised was easier, better. You remember how it went, don't you?

Jesus, having just been baptized by John, was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness where He stayed for forty days eating nothing. So, the first temptation is to turn the stones into bread. The messenger brings the message, "You don't have to deprive Yourself, Jesus. Satisfy Your own

needs.” Then again, the messenger of death comes along and offers an easier way. Taking Him up he shows Him all the kingdoms of the world and promises, “To You I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours” (Luke 4:5-6). And then in a third push, the messenger comes and offers a quick escape: “Throw Yourself down from here for it is written, ‘He will command His angels concerning You, to guard You’” (Luke 4:9-10).

At the same time, we can be sure that the messenger of life was there too. In fact, both Matthew and Mark tell us that “the angels were ministering to Him” that is, to Jesus (Mark 1:13). No doubt they were there reminding Jesus of His mission, that He had taken into Himself human flesh so that He could go to the cross and give His life as a ransom payment for many so that His creatures, humanity, could be freely forgiven for their sins and receive the gift of eternal life.

Naturally we also know that the two messengers did not stop contending with each other over the life of Jesus after this one skirmish. No. In fact the scriptures tell us that the messenger of death left the Lord until an opportune time. That time came when Jesus was hanging from the cross and the crowds down below were mocking Him. “Come down from the cross and we will believe in You” (Matthew 27:42). These were very real temptations from the messenger of death. “Save Yourself Jesus. These people are not worth Your suffering and death. Let them be damned. You don’t have to do this! There is an easier way for You.”

It’s the same old story. The messenger of death offers what appears to be an easy way out, free of pain and suffering, but his way ultimately leads to an eternity of death. The messenger of life, on the other hand, offers a difficult path but which in the end leads to an eternity of life.

You know it from your own experience. The two messengers contend over you as well. The messenger of death lays out before you a life of ease. “Go along to get along. You don’t have to agree with the homosexual lifestyle but live and let live. Let them do their thing and you do yours. You can hold your own opinion in the privacy of your own house or church, just don’t bring it outside. In this way you can lead your life in peace and quietness.”

Of course, there is the voice of the other messenger too. “You can’t just let those people go to hell. You have to warn them. You have to tell them that God says that those who do such things cannot inherit eternal life. Yes, it will be difficult to speak about such things but they need to hear the Word of God.”

Or the messenger of death comes and says, “Oh what horrible news you have received today. There seems to be no hope for you now. The doctor said that you are going to die of this disease and it will be a long painful experience. You know, you could take matters into your own hands. Take your life, you are going to die anyway. Why not go out on your own terms?”

On the other hand, the messenger of life says, “You can’t do that. Matters of life and death belong in the hands of the creator. It was God Himself who announced: ‘I kill and I make alive’

(Deuteronomy 32:39). If you were to take your life that would be like saying you are the god of your own life. I know things will be difficult but through it all the Maker of heaven and earth will be with you. Jesus Christ, the one who died to secure eternal life for you is with you. You will never be forsaken or forgotten. You have Jesus' own promise on that."

And that's the way of it in this world. Two messengers contend over each of us all the time. They lay before you the way of death and the way of life. The way of death is the broad, easy path. It looks attractive because it appears to be the easy way. You get to live the way you want and get everything that you desire. But in reality it is exactly as Jesus said: "The gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many" (Matthew 7:13). Life cannot be found by going that way.

The way of life, on the other hand, is the way of the cross. It is the way of being faithful to the God who created you, redeemed you through Jesus' sacrificial death and victorious resurrection, and is at work to sanctify you through the ministrations of the Holy Spirit by the means of grace. It is a difficult way. As Jesus Himself describes it: "The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to eternal life, and those who find it are few" (Matthew 7:14). It is hard because it is contrary to what the majority are doing. It is constantly swimming against the current. It is climbing uphill. It is the way that gains life by losing it.

And yet in the way of the cross, the way of life, the Lord places Himself with His presence, provision, and pardon. Elijah found this to be the case as the messenger of Yahweh fed him with heavenly food that strengthen him for the forty-day journey to Mount Horeb. Elijah was strengthened by the provisions provided by Yahweh. And he was pardoned for his fear and desire to give it all up in the face of difficulties. And of course in the encounter on Mount Horeb Yahweh reveals that He has been with Elijah all the while in that still small voice of comfort.

So it is also with you. No matter what difficulties you face you can be certain that the Lord Himself is with you. How can know for sure? Ask yourself what provision the Lord has provided for your journey. Still not sure? Consider our Gospel lesson for today. What does our Lord Jesus say there? "This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is My flesh" (John 6:50-51). In other words, the Lord has provided you with the bread of life. It's not like any other bread in this world. It is bread from heaven. It is the very flesh of the only begotten Son of God. It does not enter and then pass out of you again. It enters and the Son of God takes up residence in your body. The Lord does not leave you alone in this journey. He is with you. He is within you. And because He is in you, you can also be absolutely certain that you are forgiven because God cannot stay where sin is. His presence destroys sin and death. Therefore you know for sure that your sin is all forgiven, canceled, taken away because Jesus Christ dwells within your body.

This is great comfort for you do not journey along the narrow way to eternal life alone. Jesus Himself is with you, in you. The messenger of life is speaking to you His creative powerful word of life. Do you hear it? It's a still small voice but it announces an astounding, death-defeating,

grave- rendering truth... “You are forgiven for all of your sin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen”