

Living Stories:

The Centurion's Slave (Luke 7:1-10) & the Showdown on Mount Carmel

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It was August 14, 1945. My grandmother was doing chores in the kitchen while the children played outside in the yard with their friends. They were playing "Lawn Party," which is what the local church in that small village called their summer fair. At a real Lawn Party, there were games and booths. There was food, of course, and handcrafted items for sale, and the town band played.

In the children's version of Lawn Party that day, they had tables of crafts that they had made to sell. My grandmother had given them a box of Ritz crackers and a jar of peanut butter to make little sandwiches, which they sold for one cent apiece. She had also given them sugar for Koolaid – a precious gift in those days of rationed sugar. For music, they brought the old wind-up Victrola outside. One of the neighbor boys donated his time to keep winding it – and they played records for one penny each. They had a sideshow, with blankets thrown over a clothesline for a stage, and they charged a penny for a song or a poem. All the kids who lived in the surrounding streets came, and my grandmother's children did quite well, for they made \$17.50!

As my grandmother kept an eye on them and worked in the kitchen, she was listening to the radio. All afternoon the radio announcers were saying that President Truman was to give a special announcement at 7:00 p.m. When one of the broadcasters hinted that it could be the end of the war, my grandmother went outside and told the children that if, indeed, the war was over, they could all come in front of her house with a flag or a flute or whatever they had, and they would have a parade.

At 7:00 p.m. the message came through: President Truman announced to the American people that the war was over. You could see children come from all directions to my grandmother's house, carrying their flags, their flutes, whatever they had. My grandmother said to her husband, "Why don't you get your drum?" for he was in the town band, and so he did. My grandmother went up to the attic and brought out all the flags she could find in a trunk up there, and the parade started.

It wasn't long before they passed the Bonenfant's house around the corner, and the fathers and uncles, who were also in the town band, got their instruments and joined in. When they passed his house, their neighbor Mr. Dupont joined the parade with an effigy of Hitler that he pushed in a wheelbarrow. Then the parade passed the house of the band's director, John Bellerose, and *he* joined in! Before long, all the town band had become part of the parade as the children, with my grandmother alongside, marched up and down the streets of the neighborhood in their victory parade. They marched all around the village, ending finally on Main Street, where the celebration continued until the wee hours of the night. People who had gone into the nearby cities of Manchester and Concord came back and said that Suncook had the best celebration, and they

joined in, too, dancing and singing in the street. And that's how my grandmother started the victory parade at the end of WWII in the little town of Suncook, NH.

And so, on this Memorial Day weekend, we remember those celebrations, and we honor the lives lost and the sacrifices made then and in all past wars, including those in more recent times, and we celebrate our freedom in a world where not everyone has this luxury.

I treasure these stories my grandmother shared with me, for stories bring the past to life. There are two marvelous stories in our Scripture readings today that also bring the past to life, and one of them has a soldier; these stories fit well our diocesan theme of Know Your Story; Tell It Boldly.

First, Elijah and the Prophets of Baal: This is my second favorite story from the Old Testament. You heard my first favorite a few weeks ago at the Easter Vigil service – it was the Valley of Dry Bones from the Book of Ezekiel.

This story is from the First Book of Kings, and it helps to know what was going on as the story begins.

Baal (bay'-al), which seems most often the way the name is pronounced in English – it would be Bah'-al in Hebrew – Baal is a weather god associated with thunderstorms. According to Harper's Bible Dictionary, Baal was said to appoint the season of rains. Clouds were part of his entourage and lightning was his weapon, possibly his invention. The windows of his palace were the openings in the clouds through which rain flowed. Baal was a Canaanite god, and rain was important to Canaanite agriculture. Baal was a god of abundance and fertility. Baal was a popular god.

It is circa 850 B.C. Israel is ruled by King Ahab, whose wife is a Phoenician princess named Jezebel – yes, that Jezebel. She is devoted to her god Baal and personally supports 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of his goddess wife Asherah. Jezebel is also a zealous missionary, promoting the worship of her god Baal and trying to suppress the worship of the God of Israel.

Now, there is a drought on the land, and where there is drought, there is famine because food plants cannot grow without water. Elijah, a prophet of Israel, had predicted the drought and is not exactly in the king's favor; nor is he in the queen's favor, for she thinks he caused it, so Elijah has been hiding out, and now the word of the Lord has told him to present himself to King Ahab, so he does.

"Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" That's how King Ahab greets Elijah, but Elijah tells him, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals."

Elijah tells Ahab to gather all of Israel, including the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, on Mount Carmel. It's time for a showdown.

When the people gather, Elijah asks them, “How long will you go limping along with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him, but if it’s Baal, then follow him.”

The people are silent.

Then Elijah says, “Let’s see whose god is real. On one side, we have the Lord, and I am his only prophet here. On the other side, we have Baal and there are 450 prophets of Baal here.

“Give us two bulls. You, the prophets of Baal can choose one and cut it in pieces for the sacrifice and lay it on the wood. I will do the same with the other bull, but none of us will light a fire. Then you will call upon your god and I will call upon the name of the Lord, and the one who answers by fire is indeed God.”

Everyone agreed. “You go first,” said Elijah, so the 450 prophets of Baal prepared the bull for the altar, lay the wood, and began to call on the name of their god, “O, Baal, answer us! O, Baal, answer us!” They wailed and cried from morning ‘til noon. At noon, Elijah mocks them, saying, “What’s the matter? Can’t your god hear you? Maybe he went on a journey! Maybe he’s sleeping! Maybe he’s answering nature’s call!” The prophets of Baal raved on and on, but there was no voice, no answer, no response.

“My turn!” says Elijah, and the people gather around him. Elijah built his altar with twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he dug a large trench around the altar, placed the wood, cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood.

And then he called out, “Fill four jugs with water and pour it on the altar, all over the offering and all over the wood.” The people murmured among themselves, “Why would you pour water all over the wood like that? It won’t light if it’s wet!” But they did as Elijah asked, and then he said, “Do it again!” So they did it a second time. And again he said, “Pour water over the wood a third time!” and the water ran all around the altar, filling the trench that Elijah had dug.

Then Elijah prayed, and the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the bull, the wood, the *stones*, the *dust*, and *even licked up the water that was in the trench*, and when the people saw this, they fell on their faces and said, “The Lord indeed is God!”

What a great story, so rich with detail that you feel as if you were there! Scholars think that the story wasn’t written down until 200 years later, but it must have been told again and again and again to have so much detail.

And now the gospel of Luke. How appropriate, on this Memorial Day weekend, that we have a story about Jesus and a soldier!

Jesus has been traveling about the country, preaching and teaching, when he comes to Capernaum. Some Jewish elders approach him on the street.

“There is a Roman soldier here who wants you to heal his slave, a slave he cherishes. The slave is sick and near death.” And they reassure Jesus, “He is worthy to have you do this! He loves our people. It is he who built our synagogue.”

Jesus agrees and goes with them, but as they approach the house, the centurion sees him and sends his friends out with a message: “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Just speak the word and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man of authority, with 100 soldiers under me. If I say to one, ‘Go,’ he goes, and if I say to another, ‘Come,’ he comes, and if I say to my slave, ‘Do this,’ he does it. You do not need to come into the house to heal my servant – speak the word and it will be done.”

Jesus is amazed. He turns to the crowd, the crowd that always followed him, and says, “This – this is faith! Not even in Israel have I found such faith!”

When the centurion’s friends return to the house, the slave is in good health.

What do these two stories have in common? Faith, for one:

Elijah believes so much in God’s power that he has the altar drenched in water three times before he asks for the gift of God’s fire.

The centurion is amazed that Jesus would respond to his request in person – a strict Jew would not enter a Gentile’s house. He knows that Jesus has only to speak the word from anywhere and the healing will happen.

Both stories are filled with power, earthly and heavenly: both stories have people in authority playing key roles in the events and both have a miraculous ending.

What do these stories tell us about God? That God answers prayer. That God cares about God’s people. That God wants us, wants to be in relationship with us. That God never gives up on us. Even if we follow the prophets of Baal. Even if we are an enemy soldier or a dying slave.

But wait – there’s more! Look at the differences:

Elijah is calling the people back to God, rejecting the god that Queen Jezebel prefers. That was what was needed in that time and place.

But look at Jesus: He healed the slave of a Roman centurion. A stranger, a foreigner, an enemy officer in an occupying army – a Gentile. *Not* one of the chosen people.

Jesus was willing to enter the soldier’s house and be “unclean” in the eyes of the law for the sake of someone who wasn’t part of the club. Did he ask first if the centurion personally accepted the God of the Israelites? Did Jesus ask him first what sins he had committed? Why he had a slave in the first place? What his theological beliefs were and

whether he was ready to accept the One True God, the coming of the Messiah, and the Scriptures as the Word of God?

No. He did not. He shared God's loving mercy with the centurion and his slave with no questions and no strings. Unconditionally. Wow.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu says, "I don't preach a social gospel; I preach the Gospel, period. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is concerned for the whole person. When people were hungry, Jesus didn't say, 'Now is that political or social?' He said, 'I feed you.' Because the good news to a hungry person is bread."

And the good news to a servant near dying is healing, and the good news to an enemy soldier who asks for help is help.

We are not called to "be Christians" – we are called to Follow Christ, to walk in his way, the way of God, to give bread and healing and welcome to all without question, whether that happens at the soup kitchen or building houses in Guatemala on a mission trip or singing Kumbiyah with the residents at Matheny Educational and Medical Center or doing the work that God has given us to do at our jobs, in our homes and neighborhoods, at our church fairs, wherever we are.

Sometimes Christians express a desire to shut out the outside world and live and work and socialize only with other Christians, with others who think the same way.

Sometimes they want to build walls to keep out the people who aren't like them.

Sometimes people think that's the Kingdom of God.

But I think that the Kingdom of God is like this: we are called to come together in community to worship and then we are called to go out into the world to shine the Light of Christ into all the dark places. Not by preaching or judging or questioning but by loving and helping and sharing and building houses and feeding and singing, and *being* Christ in the world, welcoming all regardless of ethnicity, belief, status, economic situation, country of origin. We are called to accept and welcome even when we don't share the same beliefs, even when *they* are different, even when we disagree.

Spiritual writer Madeleine L'Engle said, "We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it."

May our light, the Light of Christ, shine in the world in which we live and move and have our being, may it shine so brightly that others will see its loveliness and be drawn to its source and be welcomed into our hearts and our community. *Amen.*