

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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August 9, 2015

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was like a scene from a horror movie on that dark morning at the social service agency where I used to work. Everyone was silent and somber, with pain, venom and grief burning in the shadows of their eyes. A cloudy essence reigned free throughout the building, smelling oddly like smoke.

What happened, you ask? Did someone die? Did we lose that major federal grant we had spent weeks working on, or have a donor back out on much-needed funds to feed our hundreds of needy clients? Did some cataclysm occur that numbered our days in the office? No, it was worse than all of that, far worse – the coffee pot in the breakroom was out of action.

After the coffee was brewed the day before, someone had taken all but half a cup of coffee out of the pot, left that small amount of liquid in the pot, forgot to turn the burner off, and left it on all night long. The coffee simmered down to soggy grounds, scorched, burned, and welded itself to the glass. This meant that a staff of about thirty people, most of whom depended upon a certain level of coffee in their blood to be able to speak, never mind be civil with each other and our clients, had their hopes of a regular day shattered. This also meant that hundreds of people who came to our soup kitchen, dozens who came to our mental health drop-in center, and how many individuals coming for case management, pharmaceutical assistance, housing referrals and who knows what else would come in, only to meet a staff of people who could have passed for characters from *The Walking Dead*.

“Sovereign Lord, it is enough, now,” Elijah prayed. “Take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” That sounds eerily similar to the prayers many on our staff prayed that day. It’s funny how facing the dryness of a burned-up coffeemaker or the dry heat of a barren desert

shakes things out and reveals things, and people, for who and what they truly are.

Up to now, Elijah has been the prince of confidence, facing down a bamboozling king and a wicked queen, stopping the rain for long periods of time, daring four hundred prophets of the local fertility god Baal to a fiery contest pitting their deity against the God of Israel, and then killing all of them when they lose. But then Jezebel puts a contract out on him, and he runs for his life into the wilderness. Later, he'll be told to anoint his own successor and two kings, launching a bloody civil war. Small wonder, then, that the hunger and fear overtake him. The journey is too much for him before it even gets started. After all that confidence, swagger and faith that carried him through, he's no prophet. He is nothing more than a weak, burned-out human being, awaiting death. Worst of all was that he finally knew that.

All he had a right to expect at this point was judgment, rejection and abandonment. He was a hopeless, depressed shell of a man, useless to God and to himself, or so he thought. After all, if he were of any value to God, to his mind, he wouldn't be feeling the way he was. He'd have gotten it right the first time and continued to get it right. But he didn't, and so now he sits and stewes in his own despair.

Why then does an angel show up not once but twice, and give him the food he needs to make a forty-day journey to the holy mountain? Why is he given the food and drink that brought new life just when he had prayed fervently for death? Why is his commission as prophet reaffirmed, and in the end, why is he given new tasks to do, and a promise that Israel will be preserved both from idol worship and from its own bloody feuds? Why is he not just offered the food, but is actually touched by the divine?

The only answer is that God was not finished with him yet, nor with Israel to whom Elijah preached. Where everybody else, including himself, saw a burned-out, depressed, useless mess of a person, God saw a beloved child, one whom God loved, a person who could still announce God's message to Israel, and who would point out that, even when the entire nation was as beaten and broken as Elijah now felt, even when

they were sent into exile and scattered throughout the world, God was not finished with them yet. On the contrary, God was only beginning.

So, what wilderness are you wandering through these days? You might not be blindsided by a dysfunctional coffeemaker when you come into work tomorrow morning. Even if you are, that problem can be solved the way we solved it, by sending a staff member to Walmart for a new coffeemaker (and it was like a new dawn had blazed up within our office). But most of life's conundrums are not so easily fixed. In the wake of those crazy storms battering the city the other night, in the aftermath of yet another week of way too many shootings and stabbings (including that of Christian Taylor) splashing blood across the news, and in the wake of the ELCA's conversations this week on racism's infection saturating through our whole denomination, it's certainly tempting to throw up our hands and pray Elijah's prayer that our lives be taken away, for indeed our grief, our finitude, our helplessness before entire systems and structures contaminated with darkness and sin are proof that we are no better than our ancestors. Money can't solve those problems, nor can political candidates, nor even an extra cup of coffee.

But thankfully, no wilderness of mind or soul can check the grace of the One who continues to touch us and commands us to eat and drink. If it could, we would never hear the words we heard at the very beginning, that our sin is forgiven and we are loved, welcomed and cherished in the presence of God. We would never hear the words of the Gospel, the words of One who hung from another tree outside another city, driving redemption into the very dirt and stones of this world, making all things new. We would never taste the body and blood of the One who would rather die than condemn us to the wilderness of sorrow and the despair of the grave, and who promises that not even death will put us beyond the reach of God's love and dream of new beginnings.

So, in that sense, maybe the wildernesses of our hearts are not as deserted as we might think. For they shake us out and reveal us for who and what we truly are. And they shake out God's promise that, in spite of what we are, even when the chips are down, God is not finished with us. To the contrary, God has hardly gotten started.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.