

# “Where is Elijah?!”

a sermon by

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Text: II Kings 2:1-12; Mark 15: 25-39

Perhaps you have read the most recent article about Jesus in Time magazine this week. It is the cover story – “Why did Jesus have to Die?” John Stott, an Anglican preacher and author is quoted in the article as saying, “I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the Cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to [suffering]?”

One of the scenes in the movie “The Passion” that I like the most was a flashback of Jesus at home – looked to be in his twenties – and he was building a table with his

mother nearby. She was bringing him something to drink, and evaluating his handiwork, and they were laughing and being playful. In another scene, Jesus as a toddler had fallen down and scraped his knee, and his mother was running to pick him up and comfort him. Ordinary events, ordinary days – a normal life. The Bible only records the extraordinary events of Jesus' life. His birth, the time in the temple at age 12, his baptism, temptation, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection. Think about all the ordinary days in this man's life. Days a lot like ours in that they had a regular routine – a waking and eating, working, socializing, participating in a family, worshipping, sleeping.

Jesus knew the ordinary. He knew what was expected. He knew what it was to work hard, to use his hands to make things, to share a good meal with family, to enjoy a sunny day, to have a good night's sleep, to read and study scripture, to laugh with friends, to worship at the local synagogue. From the response of his community to him who, when he started preaching marveled that this man was just regular old Jesus from Nazareth, it is apparent that for many years he did not make waves. And so when he started to interpret the scriptures and preach with authority, when he began to heal the lepers and proclaim forgiveness to the sinners, the people who had known him in all the previous years, could not reconcile this apparent contradiction in front of them. He was not whom they expected to bear God's word. He was really just an ordinary man.

The fact that Jesus' teachings constantly shattered the standards of what was expected is a sign in itself of the new revelation that he embodied in his life, death and resurrection. To heal on the Sabbath, to tell a story about workers who came at the last minute and still were paid the same as those who had worked all day, to befriend

prostitutes and tax collectors, to call humble fishermen as disciples, to break societal barriers and talk with women and Samaritans, to literally turn the tables of those in power at the temple – Jesus’ entire ministry challenged people’s understandings of what was true, and righteous and of God. His death tore the curtain of the Holy of Holies in the temple in two – his death shattered every idea of what was holy. His death turned inside out their conceptions of God. The crucifixion of this ordinary man was not how the Jews or the Greeks believed God would choose to reveal Godself. The cross shattered any conceptions of a messiah and continues to shatter our conceptions.

The writer of the gospel of Mark focuses on the tension between what was expected and the reality of who Jesus was. At one point it seems that Jesus’ own disciples finally figure it out. Jesus asks them, “Who do people say that I am?” They respond, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” Then Jesus asks them, “But who do *you* say that I am?” And Peter answers him, “You are the Messiah.” So there is this moment of discernment and recognition, but then the disciples, the ones who love him and are closest to him, are thrown into confusion again, because Jesus does not act the way a Messiah is supposed to – the things he says, simply don’t make sense. Jesus points to the fact that he will suffer. Their hope – and isn’t it all of our hope – is that the Messiah will come to put an end to suffering. The truth is more than the disciples can bear. Immediately after Peter’s recognition of Jesus, Jesus tries to explain to them what it means for him to be the Messiah. Mark records that, “Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” What is Peter’s response? He REBUKES Jesus. For

this is not the truth he wants to hear. The Messiah is supposed to be powerful. How can the powerful be crucified?

And so we read tonight, as Jesus was suffering on the cross, right after he cried out words that expressed his feelings of utter abandonment and forsakenness, the mocking statement of bystanders – “He is calling for Elijah. Let’s see if Elijah will come to take him down.”

Elijah was a revered Old Testament prophet who challenged the powerful of his generation. He was so holy that he did not die – rather, as was recorded in the passage from Kings that we read tonight, he was taken up to the heavens in a fiery chariot. This man of God did not die a shameful death on a cross. Elijah was supposed to come again to usher in the day of the Lord, the advent of the Messiah, that time prophesied through the words of the prophet Malachi: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.” If Jesus was the Messiah, “Where was this Elijah?”

Ah, but Jesus had said that Elijah had already come, and the people did not recognize him. Jesus asserted that Elijah appeared in John the Baptist. But John the Baptist was not what the people expected either. Jesus had said about him to the crowds, “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes... Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces... For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, HE is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!”

We refuse to see what we do not want to see. We refuse to hear what we do not want to hear. We do not want to hear of suffering. How can we trust in a God who allows such suffering to exist, who redeems the world through the death of his child?

**But**, how can we not trust in God who chooses to participate in the agony of the cross?

How can we trust in a God, who refuses to gallop in on a white horse and wipe out those who oppress and persecute? **But**, how can we not trust in a God who refuses to be apart of our charades of power and royalty?

How can we trust in a God, who acts in ways that don't fit our notions of what is proper and righteous? **But**, how can we not trust in a God, who chooses to be revealed in the form of one just like us – an ordinary person. These questions bracket the tension of our faith. They leave us uncomfortable, questioning. They are not to be resolved, but to be lived. Jurgen Moltmann, a German theologian of the twentieth century, writes in his book The Crucified God:

*If faith in the crucified Christ is in contradiction to all conceptions of righteousness, beauty, and morality of man, faith in the "crucified God" is also a contradiction of everything men have ever conceived, desired, and sought to be assured of by the term 'God'. That "God", the "supreme being" and the "supreme good", should be revealed and present in the abandonment of Jesus by God on the cross, is something that is difficult to desire... In spite of all the "roses" which the needs of religion and theological interpretation have draped around the cross, the cross is the really irreligious thing in Christian faith. It is the suffering of God in Christ, rejected and killed in the absence of God, which qualifies Christian faith as faith, and as something different from the projection of [human's] desire... Christians who do not have the feeling that they must flee the crucified Christ have probably not yet understood him in a sufficiently radical way.*

Ironically, it is the suffering of God on the cross that speaks the most to those who suffer.

Margaret Spufford is a British historian and writer, and a dedicated Roman Catholic. In her book, Celebration: A Story of Joy and Suffering, she shares autobiographically her struggles in faith as she copes with personal experiences of suffering. In the late 1960s, while she was a young mother, Margaret was afflicted with extreme, degenerative osteoporosis which left her frequently immobile, in a body cast, and in continual pain from a disintegrating spine. In this condition she did all she could to take care of her young children. When she herself was ten, her mother had collapsed in front of her from an overwhelming stroke and died. In addition, Margaret's own daughter was afflicted as an infant with a genetic disease that left her in the hospital for a year. She died when she was only 22. Margaret Spufford knows suffering. She knows her own suffering caused by intense physical pain. She tells of a time when the ambulance drivers dropped her as they were carrying her to the van, and as she screamed out in pain not even her husband at that moment could reach her – she writes, “[My husband's presence] was utterly irrelevant through the pain... [but] extraordinarily, at that moment of unreachability, even as I screamed, I suddenly became aware of the presence of the Crucified. He did not cancel the moment, or [lessen] it, but was inside it.”

Even worse than Margaret's own pain was the pain of experiencing the suffering of her daughter and the other children on the hospital ward. Witnessing, feeling helpless before their agony, Margaret wrestled with her understanding of a loving, compassionate God more than ever. She did not resolve the question of why there is pain and evil in the world. Like all people of faith, she had to learn to live with this question. But, she writes in words remarkably like the ones from John Stott that I quoted in the beginning of this sermon:

*On those terrible children's wards amid their screams of pain, I could neither have worshipped nor respected any God who had not Himself cried, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” ...I have spoken openly of suffering and*

*of death, because it seems to me that a faith which cannot comprehend these realities, and contain them within its central paradox of life through God's death, is not worth having. We have to learn to live within the tension which seems so much the crux of Christianity... If we cannot, we are only subscribing to pious platitudes.*

Where is Elijah? Why does he not come and take Jesus down from that cross – save him from such a horrific, ignoble death? Jesus' death on the cross is a death that shatters the realm of the expected, just as the death of a spouse, a friend, a son or a daughter has the potential to shatter our illusions of the expected. We can never put the pieces of our world back together in the same way after such a death. To heal our understanding of hope and faith and life and our very trust in God, these shattered pieces have to be brought back together in a new shape and form. The cross is the concrete reality of this brokenness we face. The communion meal we are about to share as we remember Jesus' last meal with his disciples, is a concrete reminder that God does not stand apart from our brokenness and suffering, but instead participates in it and with us *and* takes it on God's very self.

Jesus took the bread and broke it and said,  
**“This is my body, broken for you.”**