

I KINGS 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a or ISAIAH 65:1-9

PSALM 42 and 43 or Psalm 22:19-28

GALATIANS 3:23-29

LUKE 8:26-39

Second Sunday after Pentecost; Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 19, 2022; Year C

Good as Gold! Good as God?

One of the many dangers of preaching is the propensity of biting off more than the preacher can chew, though that has never stopped me in my relentless homiletical pursuits! As I experience the reentry of pastoral and pulpit ministry after a much-needed respite, enjoying my spring clergy retreat, vacation, and my first experience with the annual meeting of the Wisconsin Conference, I find myself presented with a plethora of wonderful themes that I truly believe all need to be brought to our attention. But I will not yield to that temptation! There are two ideas however that somehow, I hope I can seamlessly merge and mesh to create a moderately coherent sermon. The first image is the story of Elijah's fleeing from the wrath of Jezebel, whereupon he finds himself hiding in a cave and experiencing God in what for him was a most distinct and unusual way as the prophet was forced to endure the deafening silence that beheld holy presence. The second motif is derived from the Apostle Paul's bold declaration in Galatians, his most pronounced proclamation, that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. Despite Paul's traditional orthodox Jewish upbringing combined with his membership in the club as a card-carrying Pharisee, Paul, in his radical conversion to Christ, had come to see, that clearly in the eyes of God and at the foot of the cross, all human beings are gloriously created equal, imaging the very divine nature of the One who had created them to be just who they are. It is an acclamation that should joyfully reverberate within us all as we honor and celebrate Juneteenth, commemorating the defining

bellwether day in 1865 when federal troops arrived in Galveston, Texas and took control of the state, declaring that all enslaved persons were to be freed immediately. This historic event sadly took place a full two and a half years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln. Sometimes the arc of justice is indeed long and delayed! And justice delayed is always justice denied! Long a traditional American holiday celebrated in the African American community, this day is now a worldwide observance, now honored as a federal holiday for us all, so decreed by President Joe Biden on June 17, 2021. The festivities will be officially observed tomorrow!

No doubt all of us are familiar with the haunting lyrics of Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel's 1968 hit song The Sound of Silence, but you may not be as familiar with the 1967 hit song by the Tremeloes called Silence Is Golden. The song contains the wonderful line, "Talking is cheap, people follow like sheep!" True, so very true! As with today, there was a whole lot of noise overwhelming the decade of the 1960s. I have often said that if silence is golden, we should all get rich on occasion! Transition here! There must have been a whole lot of noise going on inside Elijah's head back in the day as the prophet of God ran from his number one adversary, the very conniving and cunning Jezebel who sought to kill him much in the same way he had orchestrated and overseen the slaughter of the prophets of Baal. Now a fugitive on the lamb, Elijah found himself alone, finding a temporary respite in a cave, hoping and praying that he was now, at least for the time being, safe from Jez's clutches as he pondered his next moves. Me thinks that perhaps some of Simon and Garfunkel's reflections reverberated through Elijah's now tormented, fearful and anxious mind, as he questioned within his being whether Yahweh his God had abandoned him. "Hello, darkness, my old friend; I've come to talk with you again; because a vision softly creeping; left its seeds while I was sleeping; and the vision that was planted in my brain still remains within the sound of silence! "Fools," said I, "You do not know; Silence

like a cancer grows; Hear my words that I might teach you; Take my arms that I might reach you; But my words like silent raindrops fell; And echoed in the wells of Silence!”

One of the challenges to preaching any text, whether it be from a lectionary selection, or a text chosen at random, is that it is always important, even essential, to examine context, demanding that the preacher or teacher turn aside and look at the larger narrative, what appears before and after, rather than solely, myopically, focusing on any of the specific texts chosen for Sunday services. Sidebar: We follow the Revised Common Lectionary, the one most used by mainline Protestant denominations like ourselves. **Elijah found himself in a predicament, a sticky wicket indeed, because he had dared to profane the religion of the Canaanites, the original owners and occupiers of Israel, the land of milk and honey claimed to be promised to the Hebrew people by their God Yahweh upon their escape from Egypt. You will remember the showdown at Mount Carmel, winners and losers clearly on display, the prophets of Baal cutting themselves to pieces with their lances, hoping in their vainly impassioned attempt to get Baal’s attention and elicit a satisfactory response. As the story unfolds, and we all know who wrote the story, like a divine pyromaniac God rained down fire upon a thoroughly soaked altar and burned it all to bits in a sudden and dramatic flash. Yes, it is always the winners who are allowed to interpret history. Yes, to the victors belong the spoils and the story. Immediately following the great divine conflagration of flaming wrath, Elijah, believing his actions were being sanctioned by his God, rounded up all the prophets of Baal and had them slaughtered on the spot, a river of blood soiling the landscape.** I love the language employed by Felix Mendelssohn’s who composed the epic oratorio *Elijah* in describing this unholy moment as a call to, an opportunity to, “extirpate the foe,” a derivative of “exterminate,” a synonym for annihilate, always a dangerous motive and mission. Having read our Christian scriptures, especially the

Gospels that fully articulate God's love fully embodied in Jesus the man of Nazareth, fully manifest in his actions, his preaching and teaching, do we really believe that once upon a horrific time God sanctioned, approved, blessed, the slaughter, the murder, the annihilation of anyone of any race, culture, or religion? I think not! Violence only begets violence! Violence always exacerbates violence, retribution, vengeance, a very intoxicating drug! Paul's word to the Galatians, which we will examine further in a moment, could have easily added to what is an endless litany of people groups that in Christ there is neither Canaanites or Israelites, neither are there children of Baal or Yahweh! There is not a God of the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and a God of the Christian scriptures, the New Testament! How inconsistent that deity would be! Imagine those today, using this ancient and archaic text as their proof text example, believing that God would rejoice in the slaying of Jews or Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists or Nativists religions or you pick one? As we all know, it happens from within every religion! These impassioned radical zealots, embedded in most major religions, do indeed exist, listening to voices real and imagined! Yes, as if we need the reminder, we are quick to acknowledge that all paths, all roads in their own unique and beautiful ways, mysteriously lead to the God who is beyond all human made language, all human made religion! Then and now! As Paul also declared, we all see through a dim mirror, a dark glass, or as the King James version of the Bible says, "a glass darkly!" On this issue the Bible is wrong because the writers, editors, and compilers were wrong! The Bible says it! I don't believe it! And that settles it . . . for me! There is always danger in calling any sacred text "the word of the Lord!" Let us hope and pray that our understanding of God has evolved beyond the sectarian, proprietary, my-way-or-the-highway, mentality that coerced and manipulated ancient peoples and continues to be an ever-present danger today among those who believe that divide and conquer is a divine right mandated by their version of an insecurely jealous God. God is one and God is God of all! In the final analysis, you must wrestle with these kinds of graphically bloodthirsty

texts for yourself. As numerous as these different narratives are, each one of us, led by the still speaking Spirit, must decide for ourselves, make our own conclusions, our own determinations, and come to grips and to peace with the content. It is always a matter of your perspective and prerogative! Now, back to our story!

Elijah had been a loyal and faithful foot soldier in God’s army as best he understood, assuming to know the will of the Divine, always a daunting and dangerous proposition. Elijah was zealously going about the business of doing God’s bidding as he believed, as best and perhaps as honestly and sincerely as he interpreted within his limited worldview demanding the defense at all costs of his tribe and clan. Surely, Elijah perceived that God wanted him to seek and destroy, to wipe out every perceived enemy of Yahweh, just like the future self-appointed Apostle Paul would one day do, perhaps even citing I Kings in the process, recalling these supposedly prophetic words as his proof text, using Elijah as his murderous role model, a template to resolve this heretical Christian problem. Oh, the arrogance of it all! “I have been very zealous for the Lord God almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left—insert much hubris here—and now they are trying to kill me too.” Well, no wonder! Is it any surprise that the remaining prophets of Baal sought retaliation, perhaps rightfully so! After all, paybacks are hell! Oh, the danger of self-righteous narcissism! As I am oft to quote a preacher friend of mine, “Ain’t no high, like a self-righteous high!” Only I am righteous, a remnant of your perfect people, all specially chosen, handpicked, selected by your wise imminence. Blah! Blah! Blah! In the oddest irony imaginable, a voice attributed as the word of the Lord came to Elijah, speaking words that would only be fulfilled in the greatest silence of a holy moment. Yahweh instructed Elijah to leave the safe cocoon of his cave dwelling, “Go and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” The writer of

this epic tale then declares, “Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.” It was the deafening sound of sheer silence. The voice inside Elijah’s head told him to get back in the game, that it was time to quit cowering in a cave. Time to man up and be the prophet God had called and anointed him to be. In these moments the mind can play tricks, a confusing cacophony of images, reality and imagination intersecting and overlapping to the point where it is impossible to know where one stops and the other begins. Alone with one’s thoughts can be a very intimidating enterprise. I cannot help but think of Jesus’ temptations as he endured the long days of his own wilderness exile. Or think of Moses after being banished from Egypt, seeing God in the ordinary of a faraway bush that appeared to burn but did not. Perhaps the best and the worst conversations are those we have with ourselves, for in those sobering talks, those internal discussions, we learn who we really are and sometimes even discover the intestinal fortitude that drives and motivates our best or our worst selves. Perhaps in the loneliness of this cave, Elijah had pause to consider his actions, the mass killings he had choreographed, the blood that would now permanently stain his hands. Our self-reflective debates and dialogues inform and inspire except when they do not! For some, they only heighten or exacerbate negative intensity, compelling horrific actions and reactions. By the way, in the interest of full disclosure, and this will come as no surprise to any of you, I am not into silent spiritual disciplines. All I hear when I am in silent mode is the overwhelming tinnitus in my right ear that has afflicted me since the age of fifteen. Strangely, I tend to thrive in the hectic business of noisy settings. I say that because some of you may resonate with that reality and resemble those words as well!

I mentioned earlier the noisy landscape affecting our country during the 1960s and you can throw in the 70s for good measure. War was raging in Vietnam as civil unrest dominated! Race, as it has always dominated our country's great experiment was a central issue, often simmering just below the surface of our civil discourse, the feminist movement also demanding equal and appropriate airtime. Protests seemed to be a way of life when we reflect on and examine news clips from back in this time in our country's history. And here we are today, now living in the twenty-first century, fifty years since Watergate and we seem to be sucked right back, sucked into the vortex of where we once were. Not only do we appear to have not made much, if any, progress, but we seem to have regressed, reverting to old habits that never made America great. We continue to live in the shadow of George Floyd's murder along with other similar acts of systemic violence, reaping what has long been sown in countless seeds of discord! As we live these days between Memorial Day, honoring the memories of the fallen who fought to insure liberty and justice for all, demanding that the promises of lady liberty—"give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses"—and the Fourth of July, Independence Day, now beautifully and serendipitously anchored in the middle by Juneteenth, we are living in the crucible of some of the worst episodic nightmares in our history, sordid events that are inflicting division and hate among all peoples of the red, white, and blue, colors that by design are meant to transcend black, brown, white, and yellow, all people of good will. As the late Frederick Douglas once observed, "The life of the nation is secure only while the nation is honest, truthful, and virtuous." During my absence from this pulpit, we have had a nauseating amount of mass shootings, lowlighted by the ones in Buffalo and Uvalde, further soiled by two mass murders that took place in churches, something that should not be lost on any of us gathered for our presumably safe sacred exercises. We just witnessed in horror the arrest of thirty-one morons from all around the nation who gathered in Idaho with the expressed

intent and purpose of attacking God's beautiful image gathered at a PRIDE festival, celebrating who they were and are specifically created to be, children of the Holy all. What voices in the silence of these people's minds are driving these sorts to act on their insanity, the craziness of their bigoted proprietary racist and homophobic attitudes. As we recall the fiftieth anniversary of Watergate, we ironically are now watching the hearings on the seditious and treasonous acts of January 6th! Oh, the irony of it all!

Silence has never been and is not now an option for those of us who follow the real, the authentic, genuine, Jesus, the man of history from Nazareth who embraced every human being no matter! To the church at Galatia, Paul, a former and reformed religious and nationalistic bigot, declared for all time, settling any argument forever, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." If Paul, as orthodox or fundamentalist as he was, a Pharisee of all things, could change his mind and become a colorblind and culturally and religiously pluralistic individual, then it should not be hard for anyone today to get with the program! What part of that statement does not make sense? What part of that declaration, that acclamation, that proclamation, do we not get? For any of us who dare to call ourselves Christian, in the silent recesses of our minds, this should be our mantra, declared from every pulpit and rooftop, every civic opportunity, proudly naming full welcome and inclusion, God's radical hospitality, as our guide for living, our goal for relating. If white Christian authoritarian nationalism does not die either a beautiful or ugly death, whichever, then this nation is already dead country walking, a great experiment that sadly, unfortunately, failed miserably. Right now, our country is in peril and risks the consequences of suffering very well-deserved outcomes, the fruits of its labors that began with the sin of slavery, if we continue to allow this cancerous hatred to metastasize and to grow! This communal cancer was exposed, fully illustrated, proudly

on display on that horrific day in Charlottesville, Virginia, captivated by chants of “Jews will not replace us,” when those deemed to be “good people” by the one elected to lead us, came out of their shameless closets. Their refrain quickly called to mind the sadistic nonsense called “the replacement theory,” that us white folks are being replaced by people of color, and all of it because of a Jewish conspiracy, a plot to take over the country and the world by diluting its citizenry. Yes, white privilege, systemic racism, is alive and well in 2022 America, doing fine thank you very much! Yes, we have been on a most hideous course, a slippery slope headed toward, on our way to a disastrous demonic crash. I would do anything to preach anything other than this damnable stuff! These poignant words bring me no pulpit pleasure, but much personal and professional pain! Yet even so, call it a huge “but,” I am compelled, called to do so because the prophet within me cannot and will not remain silent in a comfortable cave while our world literally caves, going to hell in the proverbial handbasket. As Martin Luther once declared to his unworthy foe, his twisted opponent, his version of a demonic adversary, “Here I stand! I can do no other!” This is a word we must hear and that we must collectively proclaim, Juneteenth or not! The Bible tells me so! God’s message to Elijah was to get back in the game and get back to work because a prophet in solitude in a cave is no prophet at all! It is the same message to all of us who seek comfortable shelter, who take a pass, avoiding and/or ignoring the ever-present dangers, who stick our heads in the sand and naively watch the world go by! He or she is nothing but a sounding board for his or her own musings. Yes, all this angst and anger seems so far removed from the safe and sanitized confines of Eagle River, Wisconsin, but it is here where we are and where we must draw our line in the sand, where we are called and compelled to proclaim our witness, where we give our testimony, echoing the profound and radically cutting-edge, welcoming and inclusive, most hospitable, words of the Apostle Paul, reflecting with

crystal clarity the preaching and teaching, the mission and ministry of Jesus, declaring and demanding that we are all one in Christ Jesus!

And when we question whether we, yes us, are to be such bold harbingers, emissaries, proclaiming, demanding Jesus' ultimate desire that all humanity be as one, reflecting the very realm of God here on earth as a global egalitarian society, as I close, I am reminded of these profound words written by Friedrich Gustav Niemöller, as relevant now as they were the day they were penned, "When the Nazis came for the communists, I remained silent; I was not a communist. When they locked up the social democrats, I remained silent; I was not a social democrat. When they came for the trade unionists, I did not speak out; I was not a trade unionist. When they came for the Jews, I did not speak out; I was not a Jew. When they came for me, there was no one left to speak out." As with Elijah of old, there is a deafening silence throughout our land and our world. The question before us is "Will our nation and our global village be filled with vitriol and hatred, racism and bigotry of every stripe, sexism and homophobia included, and every other blight that diminishes all humanity? I do hope and pray that Russia's unprovoked siege of Ukraine is not an indicator of the answer to that question! Or will our nation and our global village be filled with joy and compassion and a loving word of gracious peace and mercy and, of course, justice, social justice, enhancing our humanity, reflecting both the will and the nature of the Holy One, the God of every human being of every persuasion no matter?" Yes, surely as good as gold, as good as God! What noise will fill the void? What noise will fill the silence? The answer, my friends, is not blowing in the wind but will be determined by you and me and others who think and believe like we do. In other words, the answer is still to be determined!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and sees no difference between any human being, expecting the very same from each and every one of us! Amen and amen!