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“Desolation & Consolation”

1 Kings 19:1-15

“Many times we stop expecting God in the seemingly obvious places because we have been trained to seek God only in the extra-ordinary. However, God’s abiding presence can still be experienced in the daily mazes of our lives, whether we are facing abundance, adversity, or dulling routine. The presence of God is not always obvious but God remains present to us.” ~

Pastor Shandi

Introduction:

About eight years ago, I started seeing a new Spiritual Director. I was in the midst of one of the biggest transitions in my life. I had recently transferred my conference membership from the Baltimore-Washington Conference, where I had many friends, to the New England Conference, where I knew fewer friends. I had recently been appointed to be the sole pastor of this congregation, and I was leaving a job I loved at Boston University, while at the same time still trying to figure out how I was going to finish my schooling.

Even though wonderful things were happening in my life, I suddenly found myself in a state of fear, anxiety, loneliness, depression and uncertainty about my life. Over the course of the next few years, I began to feel as though I was in the wilderness. I was feeling lost. I was struggling to feel the assurance of God’s presence in my life. I felt I was alone and trying to figure out my way through the challenges before me alone. I was yearning to hear from God and to learn if I had made the right decisions, and if I still had God’s blessing in the path that I had chosen.

It was during this time that my Spiritual Director introduced me to the Ignatius understanding and spiritual practice of Discerning the Spirits developed by Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola was a Spanish Basque Catholic who co-founded the order of the Jesuits (Society of Jesus) in the Catholic Church. He had a conversion experience from the military into priesthood and learned about the discernment of spirits while he was recovering from a serious battle injury.

Ignatius had noticed different “interior movements” as he imagined his future. He discovered that some thoughts left him sad while others made him joyful, and slowly, overtime, he came to perceive the different spirits that were moving in him.

Ignatius believed that these interior movements were caused by “good spirits” and “evil spirits.” That is those coming from God and those coming from the devil. And obviously, he understood that as human beings, we want to follow the good spirits. So, Ignatius developed a framework for discerning the spirits with the hope of understanding God’s will or desire our life. The framework he developed involved examining our lives to distinguish between interior movements of desolation and of consolation.

My experience several years ago and this Ignatius discipline of Discerning the Spirits came to mind as I was reflecting on the scripture passage for today.

Interpretation:

I saw in Elijah's story some experiences and feelings that resonated with my own over the course of my life. I saw in Elijah's story the perfect illustration of what Ignatius of Loyola came to describe as the experiences or feelings of spiritual desolation and spiritual consolation.

Elijah was one of the early great prophets of the Old Testament. He had the calling of helping the people of Israel to remember their commitment to God and to help them understand God's will and desire for them. And often, this meant speaking to the Kings and Princes of Israel who were held accountable for the path that the general people of Israel took in their life.

Most recently, Elijah had gone through an encounter with King Ahab. God had sent Elijah to tell Ahab that a famine was coming. No rain would fall on the land for years because Ahab had led the people to forsake the God of Israel in order to worship the gods of his new wife, Jezebel.

The famine came to pass, and God then sent Elijah back to Ahab for a contest between the God of Israel and Baal.

As part of his prophetic witness, Elijah held a contest between himself and the prophets of Baal to whom Ahab and Jezebel were turning to for help. In the contest, God had made Himself known to Baal's prophets in a very dramatic way.

The two sides set-up wooden altars to their respective god. They each took a bull which they would sacrifice to their respective god, place it on the wood, and pray to their god to light the fire and burn the sacrifice. The prophets of Baal went first. They prayed all day but their god did not answer their prayers. When it was Elijah's turn, he decided to soak the wood in water. He then offered one simple prayer and God responded by lighting a fire to the soaking wood.

When this happened, Elijah proceeded to kill Baal's prophets, and when Ahab and Jezebel discovered what had happened, they too sought to kill Elijah. Elijah ran away and today's scripture reading finds Elijah hiding away from Ahab and Jezebel.

In the scripture, we learn that Elijah was afraid and fled for his life. We learn that Elijah fled into the wilderness; and there, he felt alone and asked that he might die. He wanted to give up.

How many of you have ever been in a situation where, for a while things were going well, you were doing what you felt was right, and then all of a sudden, you began to doubt and question if you were doing the right thing? Perhaps other people began questioning you and challenging you, and things were not going as smoothly as you had hoped.

I think Elijah might have been going through something like this. Ignatius of Loyola called these experiences: times of desolation.

Illustration: Desolation

Times of desolation are times when we feel that we are moving away from God's active presence. As we move away from God's active presence, our outlook becomes increasingly gloomy and self-obsessed. We begin to feel negative emotions such as doubt, fear, resentment, selfishness, a myriad of others depending on what our particular experience is. We are bombarded by temptation and may even begin resisting God's direction. We find ourselves moving toward a lack of faith, being left without hope and without love.

For Elijah, he wanted to die, which is the most ultimate expression of desolation. However, I have learned that desolation can sometimes find expression in other behaviors such turning to the numbing effects of alcohol, drugs, and other addictions; or isolating ourselves from relationships that nurture and encourage us.

“Desolation turns us in on ourselves, drives us down the spiral ever deeper into our own negative feelings, cuts us off from community, makes us want to give up on things that used to be important to us, takes over our whole consciousness, crowds out our distant vision, and drains us of energy.”

How many of you have ever felt that way? Well there is good news and hope for you.

Illustration: Consolation

As I looked at Elijah's story, I also discovered that in the midst of his experience of desolation; God was still near. God was never far. In fact, God was fully present to Elijah, seeking to comfort him and console him and give him the encouragement he needed for the journey that lay ahead.

While he was in the wilderness and wishing he were dead, God sent an angel to Elijah. And twice the Angel invited Elijah to get up and eat. God knew that Elijah would need strength and energy for his journey in the wilderness.

Sometimes our journeys will lead us in the wilderness; and it is okay. We sometimes spend so much energy trying to avoid times in the wilderness. We spend so much time trying to protect ourselves from struggle and strife. But the scripture reminds us that, even the wilderness is a part of the journey. We can't avoid times of desolation. However, we can trust that God is present even in the wilderness.

God is sending us angels to encourage us and strengthen us for those times of desolation; and yes, God will eventually lead us out of the wilderness if we remain open to God's active presence.

Ignatius of Loyola described these times as times of Consolation. Times of consolation are times when we feel that we are moving toward God's active presences in the world.

Consolation does not always mean that we feel constantly happy or at peace. In fact, sometimes when we are doing precisely what God is leading us to do, we experience negative

pressure from others to abandon our path, or may experience challenges as a means to learn and grow. And, in the midst of it all, we can sense in our spirit that we are going the right way. This spiritual reality consoles us whether the day is bumpy or smooth.

“Consolation, I learned, directs our focus outside and beyond ourselves, it lifts our hearts so that we can see the joys and sorrows of other people, it bonds us more closely to our human community, it generates new inspiration and ideas, it restores balance and refreshes our inner vision, it shows us where God is active in our lives and where he is leading us, and it releases new energy in us.”

I believe this happened for Elijah. Eventually Elijah is led out of his wilderness and led to Elisha who became an apprentice and partner in ministry with him. No longer was Elijah alone. No longer was the burden of witnessing to God’s will his alone to carry. He could share his life and his journey with someone else.

In my own life experience, I came discover that God was indeed present to me, and that God had placed angels in my life – people who fed me with encouragement, prayer, and support along the journey – and I was able to weather the times of desolation by seeking God more intently. I learned that some times it meant being silent long enough to listen for the God in the sound of sheer silence. It wasn’t always easy – I haven’t always gotten in right – but thankfully God remains faith.

Invitation:

And for any of us who may be seeking God in troubled times. The question for you to consider is: how is God acting and moving in your life?

Spiritual consolation does not always mean happiness. Spiritual desolation does not always mean sadness. Sometimes an experience of sadness is a moment of conversion and intimacy with God. Times of human suffering can be moments of great grace.

Similarly, peace or happiness can be deceiving if these feelings are helping us avoid changes we need to make.

For people who have closed themselves off from God’s grace, the good spirit disturbs and shakes up. It stirs feelings of remorse and discontent. The purpose is to make the person unhappy with the way things are and dare to imagine that things could be better.

On the other hand, the evil spirits sometimes wants us to continue in our confusion and darkness. So the evil spirit tries to make us complacent, content, and satisfied with the distractions and pleasures in our lives. It is those times we have to be diligent in seeking God.

For people who are trying to live a life pleasing to God, the good spirit certainly strengthens, encourages, and consoles us, giving us peace that surpasses understanding. However, the evil spirit may try to derail us by stirring up anxiety, false sadness, needless confusion, frustration, and other obstacles.

It can be a challenging thing to Discern the Spirits, but the good news is that God always finds us. In the scripture, God comes to Elijah. Elijah was trying to run away, but God comes to him.

Sometimes I consider the wind, earthquake, and fire that Elijah experienced as occasions that prepared him to eventually find God in the silence. Whatever the case, God is still present to you and God is still speaking, even in the mundane and ordinary times of our lives. *“Many times we stop expecting God in the seemingly obvious places because we have been trained to seek God only in the extra-ordinary. However, God’s abiding presence can still be experienced in the daily mazes of our lives, whether we are facing abundance, adversity, or dulling routine. The presence of God is not always obvious but God remains present to us.”* So my pray and hope that those who have eyes to see, ears to hear and the hearts to perceive be led to do just that. And that those who do, may experience God giving them the eyes to see, ears to hear, and the very hearts to perceive God’s movement and will in their lives. Amen.