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Let It Be Known

1 Kings 18:36-39 (NIV) 36 At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. 37 Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.” 38 Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. 39 When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!”

Today I am beginning a new sermon series, “Praying With the Stars,” that shall take us through Palm Sunday. The “big idea” behind the series is that there are, throughout the Bible, examples of memorable, eloquent, or particularly meaningful prayers that can have much to teach us about our life and about God. Now, it might seem wrong to implicitly seem to say that some prayers are “better” than others, but that is not my intent here. Yes, God hears any prayer, no matter how fumblingly felt, or inarticulate it may seem to us. In fact St. Paul says, in words that have been a comfort to me on more than one occasion, that the Spirit can pray through us when we have no words because God indeed knows our hearts and the depths of our souls. At the same time, who among us, me included, would not like to know ourselves closer to God, to be able to express better those sometimes fumbling formulations? There are many good helps, many good gimmicks, if you will, for helping you or me to pray. One that I have often used I call the PITA principle: if you are at a loss how to pray, try praying by incorporating **P**raise, **I**ntercession (praying for others), **T**hanksgiving, and **A**scription (that is, reminding ourselves in our prayer who God is and why God is worthy of our

worship). At a recent Elders meeting, Chair Alan Pollard offered some very helpful ideas to the Elders about how to pray. The wonderful writer Anne Lamott's latest book says that all prayer can be distilled, really, into one of three categories – help, thanks, wow – and we shall be looking at her thoughts in a few weeks.

So, this sermon series is not an attempt to “evaluate” prayers so much as it is to look at some very different examples of prayer in the Bible and see how they might help us to pray, and even, perhaps how to avoid some “mistakes” in our praying that won't deepen our relationship with God.

Today's prayer comes from the prophet Elijah. It was said, as many prayers are, in a time of dire difficulty. The king of Israel, Ahab, had increasingly turned away from the worship of God and had begun worshiping the ancient middle eastern purported god named “Ba'al.” Ahab had even hired hundreds of priests of Ba'al and was trying very hard to get the people to change their loyalties from the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Miriam and Ruth, to this supposed God who seemed to be a lot more fun and a lot less strict in what his expectations were. As a fertility god, Ba'al, for example, encouraged all kinds of sexual license among the people. And, moreover, Ba'al didn't have any of those pesky prohibitions about not treating strangers inhospitably, or about persecuting immigrants, or about caring for the poor, or about making sure that all people were fed, or about the responsibility to care for the widows and orphans and the most vulnerable of the society. (By the way, the story which our scripture is a part of is also found in the Koran, which, of course, is not really surprising since the Koran's expectations of its followers for ethical behavior are just as high as those of Judaism and Christianity).

In our reading for today, which is a small portion of the whole story, this contention between Elijah and Ahab has come to a head. There is to be a contest between God and Ba'al and it is a dramatic one involving a cast of hundreds, thousands of onlookers, fire from the skies and apparent miracles. And the text tells us, to make a long story short, that in this confrontation God proved victorious, not only sending down fire from heaven to ignite and consume the pile of wood that Elijah had built up, but doing so after Elijah's acolytes had soaked that pile with gallons of water. I can only imagine how much fun it might be to make this scene into a movie! But what interests me more, and what seems more apt to me this morning on the day we are remembering and honoring a saint of the faith and example of the highest of our American ideals and aspirations, is Elijah's prayer right before the conclusion of this story; did you notice it? *"Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, **let it be known** today that you are God in Israel ... so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."*

Here's what a find curious and intriguing and ultimately inspiring about this prayer: the little phrase, *"Let it be known."* One commentator translates that phrase as "may you be known," and another has an even more striking, if rather everyday way of saying it: *"Lord, may you be famous."* Now, why is that phrase what I want to focus on this morning? What do these three ways of translating it have in common? Just this: There is no agent in this formulation, did you notice that? Nobody is actually doing the making known of God or making God famous. It's like, if you remember your grammar, the passive voice where a sentence can have all sorts of things happening in it but no one seems to be actually responsible for those things happening. My favorite is in a

restaurant restroom: “Employee hands are to be washed before returning to work.” I wonder who is supposed to be doing the washing, and I have this mental image of disembodied hands returning to work. This seemingly agent-less formulation in Elijah’s prayer – “let it be known” – also reminds me of those times when our children were small and something got broken in the house and I asked them “Who did this and how did it happen” and each of them responded “Not me; I don’t know.” There were times around our house where there was a apparently a fifth child whom we were unaware of named “Not Me” who was the agent for, responsible for, all kinds of things. “Let it be known” “May you be famous” – Well, who is responsible for that happening? Who is the agent?

Well, the answer is very simple: you and me. Elijah’s prayer is that God’s mightiness and presence might indeed be known in the world, that God’s “fame” might increase. *But who is responsible for that happening? **You and me.*** You and me. For you see, God doesn’t have a Facebook page on which to promote Himself. God will erect no billboards taking credit for things. God is not on LinkedIn or Twitter. The only way that God has of fulfilling that prayer of “*May you be famous....Let it be known*” is when you and share those workings of God in our lives and in this world. You see, God is constantly, in every moment, working to offer the highest possible good to you, to me, to all creation. God is seeking to move folks from apathy to concern, from cynicism to commitment, from xenophobia to zealously for the right, from hopelessness to hope. The effects of God showing His consistent, unwavering, gentle grace and care to move folks forward to more beautiful lives are all around us. Now, of course, sometimes folks **don’t** move to a better place in response to God’s promptings and hopes for a higher

good; sometimes they re-trench themselves in their bigotries and biases and that is a sad and frustrating thing. But God does not give up, God continues to seek to show Himself in every life even when some keep on rejecting what God has to offer.

You remember those elementary school days, once a week, or once a month, when it would be “Show and Tell Day”? This is Christian faith’s version of “Show and Tell.” *God is showing, but **you and I** are telling.* Aren’t we? Aren’t we telling of what God has done in our lives and how the power of divine love has proven itself stronger than all the hates and hurts? Aren’t we telling how there is indeed an order to the universe that is moral, that is good, that calls people towards the highest possible good? Aren’t we telling of those times that we saw God at work and people responded and behaved better, more nobly, more lovingly than might have been expected? If God is going to be famous, God is doing the showing in every moment, but you and I must be about the telling.

But I have to continue: Show and Tell is not quite enough. No, there are actually three movements here: Show, and Tell, and **Do**. That last one is also our responsibility, our opportunity. For having experienced what God can do, having talked about what God can do, then our opportunity out of our gratitude is indeed to do what we can do. The one whom we so gratefully honor this weekend, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., has some words for us in this regard, in regard to **our** doing, in his poignant and powerful “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” an essay that I re-read every January to be reminded of what a powerful force for good he was, what a powerful example he set. This is what Dr. King says: *“Human progress... comes through the tireless efforts of*

*men [and women who are] willing to be **co-workers with God.***¹ That's, that's the "doing" part. And, indeed,

- If we are to be co-workers with the God who has blessed us with food, then what we must do is to be loyal to and "do" towards a vision of a world where everyone has enough food and no child or adult ever goes to bed hungry or makes the choice between food versus medicine.
- If we are to be co-workers with the God that can still imagine and hope for a world at peace, then what we can "do" is to commit ourselves to working for a world where no one is oppressed, where no one is ever tortured for their beliefs, where no one is ever judged on the color of their skin or their ethnicity or their gender or their surname or their orientation; a world where no child will ever be called on to fire a weapon at another human being.
- If we are thankful to God for places to live that are dry and warm, and if we would be "co-workers with God," then what we must "do" is to never have it far from our imaginations of what being without a home would be like, to seek out those organizations that are seeking to minister to those who have no home.
- If we are thankful to the God who has blessed us with the care and love of family and friends, and if we would be "co-workers with God," then we are called to do everything we can to bring about a community, a world even, where every one of God's creatures knows that kind of love.

¹Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," www.thekingcenter.org/prog/non/Letter.pdf
Emphasis mine.

Can we do these things? Are there some things on that list - or so many other lists that we could make – that tug at your heart, your soul, your wallet? Then go, not only telling, but doing, doing, doing.

Yet before we close, we need to be reminded of the best news of all in the midst of God's showing and our telling and our doing. And what is that news? God has promised that He will never be absent. God has promised that even amidst life's uncertainties and hard things, He will be patiently working with and among all things and in all times and places to bring about good, to bring about hope. "O God, make yourself famous.... Let it be known!" God has wonderfully shown us. Now it's our turn: Shall we tell and do?