

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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1 Kings 19:1-4,(5-7),8-15a

NRSV

In Israel, the northern kingdom, many people have strayed from worshipping God, partly because Queen Jezebel has promoted the Canaanite religion. Elijah has predicted a three-year drought (17:1). God has guided him to take refuge with a widow at “Zarephath” (17:8-9, outside Israel); they have miraculously had enough to eat (17:15-16). Bringing rain to the land has been a contest between the powers of God and of Baal, the Canaanite god of rain (18:17-19). On Mount Carmel (overlooking the Mediterranean), Elijah has challenged the prophets of Baal with the people watching. Each party has offered a sacrifice to be burnt and have agreed that the fire to ignite the wood will come from their respective gods (18:24). The prophets of Baal have tried most of the day, but have failed (18:29); God has heard Elijah; he has sent fire. All has been consumed, even the altar (18:38). Elijah has ordered the prophets seized, and has killed them (18:39-40). The drought is over as rain clouds appear over the sea (18:45). God’s superiority has been shown, but are the people convinced?

Now Jezebel utters a death threat against Elijah (or exiles him). Naturally he is afraid (v. 3); he flees to southern Judah (“Beer-sheba”). Elijah asks to be relieved of his mission (v. 4). Again he is fed miraculously (vv. 5-8). He travels for a long time (“forty days”) to Mount “Horeb” (called *Sinai* in the south). The parallels with the story of Moses are striking. In response to God’s question (v. 9), Elijah makes three complaints: (1) the people have rejected God in spite of my efforts; (2) they have killed God’s prophets; and (3) I am the only prophet left. God orders him to climb the mountain and face him (v. 11a). God teaches the fiery prophet a lesson: rather than appearing mightily (“great wind”, “earthquake”, “fire”), here he appears quietly: “a sound of sheer silence” (v. 12). God repeats his question, for Elijah is neither on the mountain nor open to God (v. 13). God orders him to the north. Elijah’s three complaints will be answered: (1) Elisha will succeed him; (2) Elisha will kill God’s opponents; and (3) some godly people (“seven thousand”, v. 18) will remain.

Psalms 42:43

NRSV

These two psalms are a single lyric consisting of three stanzas, each with a refrain (42:5, 11; 43:5). The psalmist is ill (42:10) and so is unable to make a pilgrimage from northern Palestine (Mount “Hermon”, v. 6) to Jerusalem. He loves God dearly (42:1-4) and desires greatly to come before him in the Temple (42:2). He has fond memories of past pilgrimages (v. 4). To him, illness is a sign that God has forgotten him (42:9). Ungodly people claim that he is ill because he is wicked (43:1). May God show that he is faithful! May he be able to make the pilgrimage again! (43:3-4).

Some Jewish Christians have visited Galatia and argued that a right relationship with God comes through Mosaic law, but Paul argues that it is God’s promise(s) that establish this link. After all, Paul has written, God’s promise to Abraham predated the Law by centuries (v. 17). The Law was “added” (v. 19) because people deviated from God’s ways. It also came through a “mediator” (Moses), while the promise came directly (v. 20). The Law doesn’t “make alive” (v. 21), give life, so it doesn’t yield oneness with God. All of scriptural (Old Testament) tradition locks people into sinfulness, but God’s (new) promise of the gift of Christ is freely given to “those who believe” (v. 22): it is different; it gives life.

In v. 23, by “before faith came” Paul means *before the Christian era*, before the fulfilment of God’s promises. The word translated “disciplinarian” (v. 24) was used of a slave who supervised a child outside school hours. We were restricted in our development until Christ came. Living under the Law prepared the first Christians for Christ, for oneness, through faith, with God; however, now they are no longer subject to the Law. Baptism has implications for daily living (v. 27). Having *taken on* Christ, we are spiritually akin to Abraham (v. 29). Being “one in Christ” (v. 28), racial, social and gender differences are insignificant.

Luke 8:26-39

NRSV

Jesus and his disciples arrive in Gerasa, a city some 30 km east of the Jordan – in Gentile territory. Ancient ideas of dementia were very different from ours: (1) demons were spirits of an evil kind, thought to do battle, as a “legion” (v. 30), with God and his allies; (2) they were thought to invade human bodies and personalities, causing mental (and some physical) illness, and taking control of people; (3) “the wilds” (v. 29, the desert) was the abode of demons and destructive forces; (4) “the abyss” (v. 31) was the realm of Satan and home to demons. People who had been deprived of their liberty (e.g. prisoners) lost the right to wear clothes. “Tombs” (v. 27) were ritually unclean places. Jesus has power over evil forces (“fell down”, v. 28; “commanded”, v. 29). The man recognizes Jesus for whom he is. “Swine” (v. 32) were a symbol of pagan religion and of Roman rule: even they are subject to Jesus’ authority. Perhaps Luke predicts the fall of Rome in telling the fate of the swine (v. 33): that Roman *legions* will drown. The man not only sits “at the feet of Jesus” (v. 35), as disciples did, but becomes a missionary to fellow Gentiles (v. 39). This is a story of transformation; so dramatic is the change in the man that the people are “seized with ... fear” (v. 37): they can’t handle it.

What does Luke mean by “had been healed” (v. 36) or *saved*? Look at the changes in the man’s life: (1) from outside the city to inside it; (2) from living in tombs and being driven into the desert to living in a house; (3) from nakedness to being clothed; and (4) from being demented to being of sound mind. From destructive isolation, he has become part of a nurturing, human community. He proclaims the good news. To Luke, a “house” (v. 27) is a home where one belongs, is a person, interacts with others, and exercises personal and communal rights and obligations, including moral ones.

