

The Third Sunday after Pentecost  
June 5, 2016  
Proper 5, Year A, Track 1

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1 Kings 17:8-16 (17-24)  
Galatians 1:11-24  
Luke 7:11-17

And the LORD hearkened to the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"The LORD hearkened to the voice of Elijah." Why? Because he was a prophet. A prophet stands between God and his people not only to speak the word of the LORD to his people but also to intercede for the people to God. And the LORD hearkened to the prayer of a prophet. Does the Lord hearken to our voices? What is it that makes some prayers answered and others not? What constitutes a "proper" prayer? I want to learn how to pray like a prophet.

First there are some obvious things that can easily be forgotten. First, God is God. God will never do anything which God thinks is a bad idea. God will never do anything contrary to God's own will. The corollary to this is that my desires or opinions as to what is good are not ultimate. God's will is what is best for us because God loves us.

Second, God is God, and when we ask we are asking not telling, or advising, or bargaining.

The third axiom is a little less obvious. There is no unanswered prayer. The answer may be "No," but that is a legitimate answer. For example, "If it be possible, let this cup pass me by." The answer to that prayer was "no." It may be that the answer is not immediately apparent, and in those cases you may not know right away what the answer is. If you pray for a sick person to get well, and there is no immediate change in the person's condition does that mean God isn't answering the prayer? Of course not. It may mean that the answer is "no," or it may mean that the answer is "yes," but God is using the natural processes of medicine and nature to accomplish the healing.

But what about these stories of God responding to prayer in a miraculous way? I want to note three marks of this kind of prayer. They concern the style of the prayer itself, the nature of the intercessor, and the result of the answer.

First, about the prayer itself. These prayers tend to be quite direct. "O LORD my God, let this child's soul come into him again." There is the story of Jesus talking to a blind man and saying, "What do you want?" We need to be clear about what we want and then say it. But more than that, often these prayers are quite bold, even argumentative. "O LORD my God, hast thou brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?" The point is that these prayers take their force from understanding the nature of God. If you remember the story, Elijah came to this widow and her son when they were about to starve during the famine. By God's intervention their food never ran out until the famine was over. God had already taken this family under divine protection; did he not have a responsibility to care for them? Basically, Elijah is saying, "Look here

God. You saw fit to save these people during the famine. Are you just going to let this kid die now? Come on and restore his life to him."

Now the nature of the intercessor. Elijah is a prophet. He is accustomed to acting on the word of God whenever he hears no matter what it is. He is radically obedient. Now we need to be careful here. It is not the case that Elijah earns God's favor by being a good errand boy. Rather, by doing what he hears his hearing improves. By constantly doing what he hears, he comes to know God intimately. Thus he comes to be able to talk so directly to his Lord.

Finally, notice the outcome. As a result of the healing the woman comes to a new level of faith. "Now I know that you are a Man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."

We can see these same marks in the Gospel lesson this morning as well. Because Jesus is the Word incarnate, the prayer takes the form instead of command: "Young man, I say to you, arise." Still it is direct and clear. Second, the command proceeds from an intimate knowledge of the Father's will which is nurtured by total obedience. Finally, the result is the increase of faith among the observers. "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!"

I want to challenge us today to begin to pray like prophets. We tend, I think—at least I tend—to pray weakly. We lack the boldness of the prophets. Please bless mommy and daddy. Please protect those who travel. Please watch over the homeless. I cannot imagine Elijah ever praying like that. "O LORD my God. You said you would care for the poor. You say in your scripture that you will take down the mighty from their seats and lift up the lowly. Well, you do it, or it will look like you either can't or that you're a welcher. In fact, if you don't, you might as well let me die too, since I don't intend to carry this thing by myself when it was all your idea in the first place." That's the way Moses and Elijah pray.

Of course, most of the time I don't pray that way because I am not all that certain I want God to answer my prayer. If I am made stronger, more will be required of me. If the poor are lifted up, I may be among those who are put down. No, far better some indefinite and weak-kneed prayer like "Bless my friends." Besides, Elijah didn't only pray he used his own body and its life and warmth and breath to revive the boy as well. He was willing to put his body on the line with his prayer. Are we willing to be God's instruments in the accomplishment of our prayer?

Come let us be people that pray. Let us, like Jacob, wrestle with God. Let us be bold, even outrageous in our prayer. Especially when we pray for others. Let us be as outrageous in our prayer as God is in God's love for us and in his promises. Let us pray like a prophet.