

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
June 20, 2010
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Grace that Changes the Paradigm
I Kings 19:1-15, Luke 8:26-39, Galatians 3:23-29

Have you ever been told that you needed an attitude adjustment or a paradigm change to your life? Paradigm is an ancient word that is now in fashion. It refers to an example that serves as a pattern or model. It can also refer to our attitude or the ways in which we live out our lives. Each of the scriptures today involved how God's grace caused a change or shift in how people thought and behaved. As God's grace spoke in this manner to the Biblical characters in today's passages, it also speaks to us.

Let's start with Elijah. He needed an attitude adjustment, and only God could give it to him. Remember from the background to the scripture, the evil Queen Jezebel was so angry with Elijah for slaying her 450 prophets of Baal, and proving that Baal was a false god, she vowed to kill Elijah. Elijah then fled for his life to mope under a broom tree in the wilderness, and then hid in a nearby cave. He had given all he had to the service of the Lord, but he had become arrogant and overzealous with the killing of the prophets of Baal. He had practiced the same violent methods in the sacrifice at Mt. Carmel for which he had denounced Queen Jezebel for previously using. Because he stooped to such a low level, Elijah believed that he was a great failure. He could only see the darkest side of life. He felt useless, alone and was so depressed that he thought he deserved to die at God's hand.

I do not condemn Elijah for thinking or feeling this way because I can remember being this depressed, and feeling useless or deserving of God's punishment at times in my life. Maybe you have too. It can come to any of us when we have exploded in anger and torn someone apart with words or have even used physical violence on them in some manner. When we realize the damage we have caused, we just want to die because there seems to be no way to redeem the situation or ourselves.

Like Elijah, maybe we have felt that we "alone" have worked hard on a project, and no one stepped in to help. Our efforts were unappreciated. Maybe we have been tyrannical in our treatment of others in getting the job done, and there may be a twinge of guilt mixed in with our self-pity. Often our response to this mess is to go "hide in a cave and never come out." "We will show 'those people' for not being grateful for what we did for them, and we disappear." It is possible that "those people" might just as well have had us stay away from them in our wilderness cave of self-pity and might even seal it up for us just to get us out of their lives. But, God did not work that way with Elijah, nor does God leave us in our wilderness cave of self-pity, depression or anger. God's grace moves to change the paradigm of our thinking and behavior.

God did not abandon or punish Elijah as he feared, but gave him life changing grace. He gave him sleep. Sleep deprivation can make monsters of most of us. God gave him sleep. God sent food and water to Elijah. Lack of proper nutrition can bring out our dark side. God fed and watered Elijah. God did not abandon Elijah because God knew that it was unhealthy for Elijah to be left alone. God spoke to Elijah, listened

to his problem, and then gave him what is called “a mixture of Gestalt and results oriented therapy.” God’s grace does the same for us in prayer, in sending friends to be with us, and in psychological counseling. All the anger and fury that Elijah had turned inside upon himself was shown to him in the great wind that split mountains, in the earthquake and the fire that passed before him. God was not in any of those. They were a demonstration of Elijah’s anger, and they were a release of that fury.

Where was God? Like a great therapist, God was in the grace-filled gentle whisper. God’s calm, and collected voice, once more asked Elijah his problem. Elijah stated it again. Then God, without allowing Elijah to wallow more in the problem led him to healthy results. God’s response was an instruction to live out a new paradigm. “I have more for you to do Elijah, go return to where you came from. I have a King for you to anoint.” Elijah needed God’s pattern changing grace and received it. God’s grace does the same for us. God wants us to have an attitude adjustment or paradigm shift, gives it to us, and moves us on to a much more constructive life. God did not abandon Elijah, nor will God abandon you or me. God’s grace poured out to us never ends.

As big as Elijah’s problem was, it pales in comparison to the man that was possessed by a legion of demons in the country of Gerasenes as we heard about from Luke. “Legion” was a Roman army term that described a group of 5,000 to 6,000 men. This man in Gerasenes was overwhelmed with demons as some of us may say. Others of us may say that he had an enormous and complex mental illness. Either way, he had problems that only the grace and power of our Lord Jesus Christ could clean up. By Jewish law and tradition, this man’s mental, spiritual and physical living conditions were obscene. He had no clothes, and lived among the tombs, so he was considered unclean. He could not even be kept bound in chains. He was called Legion, which only reminded the Jews of the hated Roman army. He was evil incarnate to the people in the area. He had problems that only the power of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ could clear up.

Despite the man’s unclean and unlawful living, he knew immediately who Jesus was, the Son of the Most High God, and turned to him for help. Jesus had sailed across a stormy sea to heal this human being, whom he saw not as a beast, or as a demonic, but as a child of God. The man fell at his feet and Jesus had compassion on him and poured out his grace upon him. Jesus cleared the legion of demons or the massive mental illness out of the man and gave him a new pattern for his life.

When Jesus cleansed the demons out of the man, they begged not to be sent back into the abyss, which was where evil spirits were imprisoned. So they tried to trick Jesus into keeping them free to infest someone else by negotiating to be sent into a herd of 2,000 swine (according to Mark). The swine then proceeded to stampede into the nearest Lake and drowned. This was an interesting summary of God’s grace and justice in dealing with evil. By God’s grace man was made whole and healthy again. Jesus told him to go home, and declare how much God had done for him. And, he did this with great joy!

The herd of pigs, which was unclean to the Jews, who were forbidden to eat pork or raise pigs, was destroyed. The Gentile owners of the pigs did not appreciate this. The

demons got what they wanted, to be in the herd of pigs, but Jesus got the last word in by drowning them. Evil is always self-destructive, even when it thinks it is clever. Again, the grace of God in Jesus Christ won and a human life was given salvation. Praise God!

This story speaks of God's compassion and assurance to those of us today who may suffer from mental illness or have family members that do. We know through modern science that what was often called demonic in the New Testament times is usually a chemical or neurological imbalance in the brain. Sometimes we can control it with medicines or surgically remove it, sometimes we cannot. But, it still takes the grace-filled power of the Lord to heal it or to sustain any healthy life for the person, and to give strength to those who love and support this person. I have heard wonderful testimony of the Lord's compassionate work among people who suffer from mental illness. Jesus still sails across stormy seas to heal and comfort. I find it interesting how often the most seriously ill people recognize the Lord, and turn to him, when supposedly healthy people, like the people of Gerasenes, who were filled by fear at this healing, turn their backs on the Lord. Paradigm shifts do not always come easily to us. We still need the grace-filled power of God's healing among the unclean and the supposedly clean to create healthy patterns of thinking and living.

This brings us to God's paradigm shifting grace in Galatians. Here our Lord, through the writings of Paul, dealt with the unclean and demonic attitudes such as snobbism, sexism and racism. He wrote that by placing our faith in Jesus Christ we are all children of God. "As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ." God's grace in Jesus Christ was shifting the paradigm in the world from demonic barriers to freedom, openness, and equality.

We need this paradigm shifting grace of God today where the demonic still tries to have its way. "Ethnic cleaning" is going on in Kyrgyzstan. Religious prejudice keeps Iraq from being united. Threats are made against President Obama because he is black. We still hear of women being sexually harassed in places of business, or of spousal or child abuse in the home. Evil still hunts for victims in this world.

However, when the paradigm shifting grace of God is preached and practiced by the Christian churches, this is what it looks like. Presbyterian Pastor, Randall Saxon of Peoria, IL wrote of a trip to the Middle East, "The swirling, swift waters of the Jordan River swept into the cove touted as the traditional site of the baptism of Jesus. Spiritual pilgrims from many nations, cultures and religious traditions had gathered along the bank, each waiting his or her turn to wade into the water for baptism.

The remarkable note of that moment was that all the barriers, which normally might impede one person or group from freely associating with others, was gone. Eliminated! Age, gender, nationality, and faith tradition were of no consequence as those baptized were greeted with embraces and in languages known and unknown to them.

Was this experience the result of some legislated act or politically motivated expedient? Hardly. Those who shared that sacred moment of baptism understood a

new reality; they were all one in Christ,” saved alone by the paradigm shifting grace of God in Jesus Christ. “Emphasis,” May/June 1995 pg 56.

This uniting paradigm shifting grace of God in Jesus Christ can come to us at any time and any age as we hear in this story by a Helen Montone. "We wanted our son to know that he was adopted. So from the time he was very young, we explained it to him in a way that was simple for him to understand. 'We were told that I could not have a baby in my belly and Jesus knew this,' I said. 'Jesus also knew that there was a lady who had a baby in her belly, but she could not be a mommy. From heaven, Jesus saw this baby on the day he was born. Remembering that we wanted to be a mommy and daddy and that the lady could not be a mommy, Jesus decided that the baby belonged with us. That's how we became a family.' One day on our way home from nursery school, our son asked me if he was born in Jesus' belly. I told him that he was not and again we talked about how we became a family. After driving a little bit further, I asked him if he had any questions. He said, 'Oh Mom, now I remember. I wasn't born in Jesus' belly, I was born in his eyes!'" That is a grace-filled, uniting and healthy shift in thinking. [Chicken Soup For the Christian Soul](#), pg. 310

In our baptisms, we, too, were born in the eyes of Jesus. We are affirmed as the children of the God who claims us. We are cleansed by his blood, and redeemed by his grace that is given equally to all who confess their faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, we become as one with Christ. Paul wrote that, “As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” To be clothed in Christ means that our attitudes or patterns are being adjusted, our lives are being cleansed of sin and our prejudices are being erased by his grace. In our bad times, in our demonic fits, when we need an attitude or paradigm adjustment, we can be sure the grace of God in Jesus Christ is there to change us, to heal us, make us whole and remind us we have been baptized, and born in Jesus' eyes.