

“Some Fire! Some Heaven!!”  
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)  
on June 27<sup>th</sup> 2010 (Fifth Sunday after Pentecost)  
by Foster Freed

Luke 9: 51-56

Let's start this morning with a story...with a once-upon-a-time story although, to be fair, it's a once upon a time story that the Biblical chronology dates quite precisely to the year 851 B.C....

...let's start this morning with a story which, in any other context but the context of the Bible, we would immediately recognize as a once-upon-a-time story. Here goes!

Once upon a time...once upon a time there was a very bad King. His name was Ahaziah. This very bad King, Ahaziah, was on the outs with a very good and loyal prophet, a man named Elijah. Ahaziah, the King, was so angry at Elijah that he sent out fifty armed men to find the prophet and arrest him, so that the King could punish him. But when the Captain of those 50 men ordered the prophet to come down the mountain, addressing the prophet as “the man of God”, Elijah answered that powerful Captain by saying: “If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.” And guess what! Fire came down from heaven and consumed the fifty.

And remember, please remember: this is a once-upon-a-time story, which means it is a story in which the evil king doesn't learn his lesson very quickly. He sends out another group of 50 men, also led by a very brave Captain. This second Captain not only tells the prophet Elijah to “come down” from the mountain but puffs out his chest and insists that he come down quickly. And he too, like the first Captain, addresses Elijah as “the man of God”. Once again, Elijah says to the Captain: “If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.” And guess what! For the second time, fire came down from heaven and consumed another fifty of these well-armed soldiers.

And yes: it's probably worth recalling that things tend to happen in “threes” in a once-upon-a-time story. And so this very bad King—King Ahaziah—wasn't satisfied that his first group of fifty men were defeated by the prophet. Nor was he satisfied that his second group of fifty men were defeated by the prophet. And so, quite predictably, the King sends out a third group of fifty men. Only this time, the fifty men were led by a quick thinking Captain who, as soon as he saw Elijah, fell to his knees and said: “Don't the lives of these men count for anything in your sight?” At which point the angel of the LORD speaks to Elijah and says to him: “It's alright, Elijah. It's okay for you to go with these men. It's okay for you to meet with the King.” Which is precisely what Elijah does...giving Elijah an opportunity to tell the bad King just how bad he really was! End of story.

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The ninth chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke...the ninth chapter of Luke's Gospel...concludes with the launching of one of the major sections of Luke's Gospel: a section of Luke that doesn't really correspond with anything we find in any of the other Gospels. It's the start of what's known as Luke's travel section...the section of Luke that takes up close to 50% of Luke's Gospel; a section that includes all kinds of wonderful stories and incidents we would know nothing about were they not included in Luke's travel section. But it all begins humbly enough...with that simple notice: first, that Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem and second, that he sent messengers ahead to a Samaritan village, in the hope that the Samaritans would receive him.

And, of course, we all realize that the people of Judea were not on the best terms with the people of Samaria; lest we forget, the feeling was pretty mutual! And so those Samaritans, once they hear that Jesus and his followers are enroute to the capital of Judea—once they hear from Jesus' messengers that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem—those Samaritans will have nothing to do either with Jesus or with his followers. Luke, for his part, follows that disclosure with this tiny bombshell. Listen!

*When his disciples James and John saw it, they said: "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Do you want us? Do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*

And it's hard to say for certain just what analogy James and John have in mind! Do they see Jesus as a new Elijah, who can summon fire from heaven to consume his enemies? Do they see Jesus as God's own beloved, giving the *two of them*, acting as his prophets, acting as new Elijah's, the right to summon fire from heaven? Suffice it to say that Jesus declines their offer. Suffice it to say that he not only declines the offer but in the process rebukes them. Indeed, suffice it to say that according to some of the ancient manuscripts, Jesus goes even further, turning this moment into a teachable moment in which he says to John, James and—presumably—the other disciples:

*"You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them."* Even if that is a later addition to the text, it's a great addition, one that perfectly captures the spirit of the incident. You do not know...you do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come...has *not* come...to destroy the lives of human beings...but to save them. To save them!

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The obvious temptation for us—we're pretty good at it!—the obvious temptation for us is to add this to our "Old Testament bad/New Testament good" file: which would pretty much negate the point of keeping the Old Testament as a part of our Christian Bibles. Indeed: had we the time available to us, this morning, to read and comment upon the very next episode in Luke's Gospel...

...an episode in which the New Testament Jesus is, once again, contrasted with the Old Testament Elijah...

...my hunch is that most of us would react with far greater sympathy to the behaviour of Elijah than to that of Jesus! That having been said...

...that having been said, I think it is crucial for us—as followers of Christ—to recognize that Jesus, in this morning's little snippet from Luke's Gospel, provides for us a definitive portrait (a definitive portrait) of what it means to worship the God of Old **and** New Testaments alike! In saying no to Elijah's fire, Jesus gives us a powerful glimpse of heaven! Perhaps less comfortably, in saying no to Elijah's fire, Jesus gives us a powerful glimpse of what it means for us...

...of what it means for you and for me...

...to attempt to live a teensy-weensy bit of heaven....what it means for you and for me to live the Christ life even here...even now.

And it would, no doubt, be an easy thing to draw out the implications of this morning's Gospel episode at great length. But let me highlight just two aspects of it...two aspects that seem especially relevant for times such as these.

The first has to do with religious violence. While I strongly disagree with those who want to blame religion for everything that is wrong with the world (human beings find all sorts of things over which to fight; religion is the key cause in only *some* of the world's conflicts though it is, alas, a *factor* in many others), the fact remains that there *is* such a thing as religious violence, and that such violence in the name of religion is always horrific. But it is especially tragic when violence is committed in the name of the very One who said no to "fire from heaven", the One who, in the very process of saying no, made it abundantly clear that he came "not to harm human beings but to save them." Without pretending that Christians do not face vexingly difficult issues in this regard...

...when a neighbouring country is invaded, for example, how does a predominantly Christian nation balance its desire for peace with its obligation to help the neighbour...?

...the fact remains that Christians (whether they consider themselves pacifists or not) will never go wrong when they recognize the inevitably tragic nature of violence. And we will certainly never go wrong when we renounce—forever and a day—*any* violence that is even vaguely connected to the desire to "convert" other people to our way of belief in religious matters. If Christ himself refused the offer of such means, why would we consider them an appropriate option for those who bear Christ's name?

The other especially relevant facet of this story—the other facet worth pondering on this, of all days—involves an image of God this morning’s Gospel episode offers for our contemplation. You see: despite the fact that Jesus regarded his mission as an urgent one, there were means to an end that he simply refused to countenance. Even enroute to Jerusalem...even on his way to a confrontation that was obviously filled with the risk that it would be his last confrontation...Jesus permits no shortcuts. Urgency notwithstanding, the God Jesus has come to represent is a surprisingly patient God: One who is prepared to knock and wait...One who is prepared lovingly to invite us, lovingly to entice us, but not a god prepared to *coerce* those who have been thus enticed and invited. A patient God, this God of ours: a God who chooses to wait for those who say no, rather than to cause them harm.

And you and I, like it or not, by our very participation in the life of the church, are representatives of this surprisingly patient God. Just as our resort to violence flies in the face of the God we claim to serve, our life as gathered communities inherently run counter to our worship, when we allow our own human impatience to become the operative spirit in our midst.

And yes: just as it’s a well-known secret that this congregation is holding a Congregational meeting this afternoon, it’s a pretty well-known secret that Knox is a *changing* congregation: a congregation that has experienced some fairly significant shifts over, say, the past 24 months. As with any change...as with any “period of transition”...time and patience are needed. Rome wasn’t built in a day; neither are new ministries established in a day. And the point, from where I stand, is that there is more at stake here than our just learning to be “nice” to one another. As recipients of the care and nurture of a “patient God”, surely we are called, at a bare minimum, to show one another the same patience that has been shown to us, lest we find ourselves—in an Elijah like pique—calling down fire from heaven.

I’m reminded of that poster of a little child—a little child who has obviously done something very wrong. The poster bears a brief caption: “Be patient with me. God isn’t finished with me yet.”

*When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But he turned to them and rebuked them, saying: You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings, but to save them.”*

May that very spirit...the Spirit of the Son of Man...the Spirit of the One who came not to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them...may that same lovingly patient, and patiently loving Spirit come to life in our midst. This day! Always!

Amen!

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