

-If there ever was a contest for who was more into Disney characters, my friend Tony (who also happens to be pastor at Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church in Townsend, MT), would win every time. Tony loves all things Disney. He has a Mickey Mouse smart watch, countless mouse ear hats, movie posters, and even a Disney beer mug that got used a couple of times in seminary. This love for Disney, as Tony would say, goes back a long time but particularly became strong when his mom actually worked for Disneyland Park in Anaheim, CA. Tony's mom was also a benefit when Tony and his seminary friends wanted to make a road trip down to Disneyland and get free tickets! (In fact, this was the last time Abby or I have been to a Disneyland park). I will have to say, it's one thing to just "go to Disneyland" as a regular visitor. It's a whole other thing to go with someone who has been to the park close to 50 times along with his mom who is a park employee. Our touring the park became a science: putting our names in for the "fast-trak" pass to skip the line and riding another ride while we waited. Hitting the food court at exactly the right times and most importantly timing your visit exactly so you could see the musical fountain run through one of its several "performances". I remember it was a lot of fun, though by the end of the day I found myself tired and a little oversaturated with the dazzle that Disney is an expert at putting on. In fact I remember Tony's mom sharing a little bit about the challenge of working at Disney corporate and having to best the dazzle year upon year in order to attract repeat visitors. "Sometimes, it just goes a little bit overboard and people don't really take to it," I remember her saying.

-Perhaps the prophet Elijah would understand this. Now before you get too weirded out in picturing the prophet Elijah wandering around Disneyland, let me explain.

-Our OT reading, which seems short, is actually a very important part of a much larger narrative. Elijah, who came from the small village of Tishbe where no one knows the exact location, was commissioned by the God of Israel to be a prophetic voice to the people of Israel during the reign of King Ahab. Perhaps Elijah's most famous act is his accepting the challenge to show God's power in relation to B'aal, the God worshiped by the Queen of Israel at the time, Queen Jezebel.

-We probably all remember the story a little bit from Sunday School: Elijah, the single prophet of the God of Israel, verses 450 priests of B'aal. Two bulls are taken and prepared as offerings to both gods. Elijah says: "Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God." So, the 450 priests danced around the bull, cut themselves with knives, and cried out to B'aal to answer but there was no answer. Finally, following the all day ritual, Elijah calls the people together. He prepares the bull as an offering and builds an altar. He instructs the people to pour water on the bull and altar not once, not twice, but three times. Following this, he calls out to God and immediately a pillar of fire consumes the bull, altar, and water together leaving nothing left. It must have been a truly sensational

moment. Of course, all the people present fall on their knees and worship the God of Israel crying out: "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God." All of this happens just the chapter before our reading today.

-One would expect Elijah's job to be done, right? He proved that the God of Israel is the God of all through what must have been the greatest spectacle of all time! Not even Disney could match this. Yet, instead, Jezebel (King Ahab's wife) is furious and puts out a call to kill Elijah. Elijah is forced to flee and now sits, out in the desert, cold and alone.

-It didn't work. The spectacle of fire and water didn't work. People were dazzled, but not really moved. Elijah's ministry up to this point was a failure.

-One of my favorite things about the Old Testament is how human it is. These prophets aren't superheros, they are human beings. They suffer disappointment and failure just like you and me. Thus, in many ways, I can relate to Elijah's words of frustration and desperation here: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." I think this is an emotion that we all have felt in our lives in one way or another.

-So what you have here in this story is not just a down and out prophet weirdly getting some food to eat out in the wilderness. What you have here is a pivot, a rethinking, a re-imagining. What happens after this story? Well, Elijah gets up and goes back to Israel. But on the way he runs into this little farm boy who is plowing out in the field named Elisha. Elisha becomes a new disciple and prophet of God. From this point on, the story of Elijah and Elisha gets more personal and relational. It is a transition from the sensational to the relational: the dazzling spectacle to the one on one journey together.

-Could this be our story too? I hear from my colleagues and friends who are pastors in smaller towns out in central and eastern Montana about the challenges they have in relating to other churches with very different worship styles. One of my colleagues was even asked if his church might be interested in installing strobe lights for their worship space to (as this person put it) enhance the worship experience.

-I think our society has gotten so entranced by the "Disney spectacle" that it has forgotten we are relational beings. We get so wrapped up in tweeting with someone that we forget how to simply have coffee and conversation with someone. Maybe we have more in common in Elijah's pivot in the desert than we think. Maybe our church needs to give up the sensational in order to radically embrace the relational.

-The letter to the Ephesians (our NT reading today) is one of my favorites for many reasons. This letter is attributed to Paul, but if you look at its Greek and format it most likely was not written by Paul. It was common in ancient cultures to "ghost write" something and attribute it to a more famous person if you wanted it to be noticed by a larger population. Really, whether it was written by Paul or not, it doesn't matter because the letter is an incredible look into the dynamics of the early Christian church. Remember, when this letter was written, Christians were being killed for their belief in

Christ. Christians were being kicked out of families and entire communities. They were being ostracized and scapegoated. They were being labeled as foreigners, imposters, traitors, and half-human. Imagine if you were in one of these earlier churches. Well, Christ promised to come again.....OK.....where is he? Why am I suffering? Why can't I get my family to believe?

-The letter to the Ephesians in many ways is the early church community's Elijah wilderness experience. It is a letter that is written when Christians are finally starting to realize the spectacle of Christ coming again is not going to happen, at least in their lifetime. So now what?

-Maybe it's time to see Christ less in the sensational, and more in the relational. "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another."

-Then it goes onto say: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us....." We constantly talk about ourselves as "followers of God", but how often do we say we are "imitators of God"? (the greek word is *Mimentes* where we get the english word *mimic*) What does it mean to "mimic God"?

-On this 1 year anniversary of Charlottesville, our world is aching for a radical mimicking of God "speaking truth to our neighbors" in numerous ways: in the way we engage foreigners, in the way we teach our children, in the way we vote, and in the way we love and value our spouses/partners. We are aching for relationship and a healthy modeling of love. Is this not us at OSLC that need to pivot and answer this call? Maybe someone else can concentrate on the spectacle. May God nourish our community as we seek to imitate our Savior in radically relational ways. Amen.