Topic: Fear and Power (Season of Pentecost 2, Lectionary C)  
Scripture: Psalm 22:19-28, 1 Kings 19:1-4, Galatians 3:23-29  
Hymns: BB51 Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah, VU620 Silence Frenzied Unclean Spirit, VU313 God Whose Almighty Word

———

Let’s take a moment to pray…

Lord, before this world's days even began, your Word was in the beginning, and it was with you and it was you. The mystery of that brings us to our knees. Yet today you allow us to open your Word and know you better. So, we ask that you would give us eyes to see and ears to hear. Give us hearts open to your Spirit as we seek you. AMEN.

(SLIDE) Imagine you've taken a walk for the day on a nice trail. You admire the sun, piercing through the leaves of the trees overhead, and birds singing their song for the morning, and the bees doing their work keeping all manner of plant pollinated.

You come upon a massive oak tree, it's trunk thick and its branches spread wide. It's worthy of your admiration, but you wonder how it has survived storms, droughts, and the encroachment of the urban sprawl.

What you cannot see lies under the very ground your feet stand on - the roots of this ancient pillar, twisting deep into the soil, anchoring the tree, drawing water from sources you cannot fathom, storing nutrients. If you only look at the trunk, at the branches you miss the full picture.

To understand how and why the tree stands so tall, so strong, so firm you must look at the roots. Without the roots, there would be no tree. In the same way, we must look back to understand why we are here.

You've got to understand the past to gain insight into the present. We have to look back at Elijah and Jezebel's past to understand more about our passage, and why it helps us today. Why was Jezebel so upset with Elijah to send a him a death threat? Well, let me tell you the tale... because it's one of the most epic moments in the First Testament.

(SLIDE SLIDE) The Book of Kings is a chronology of Israel's kingly line, which eventually comes to Ahab who was not a great king. To be fair, he might have been better if not for Jezebel, a temptress who seduced Ahab into idolatry and blasphemy. Anyhow, it comes to a head in (SLIDE) 1 Kings 18.

Elijah is the last of God's prophets, for Jezebel has been killing them off in an attempt to erase God from the world. Elijah sends word to Ahab for one final confrontation (EM) one last stand-off for the faith... all the blasphemous prophets of Baal against the one and only prophet left of the Lord. (SLIDE) Let's end this, once and for all is Elijah's mind on the matter.

Ahab agrees, thinking he has the clear upperhand... and the stage is set. Elijah stands before all the gathered nation, and 450 of Baal's prophets and the King. Elijah suggests to them a contest of fire, whoever's deity set the sacrifice on fire wins the day. Elijah even lets the other guys go first.

So they try and try (EM act it out - don't forget Elijah soaking his!)... but the prophets of Baal could not rouse their god to light the bull on fire. Elijah's wet offering immediately bursts into flame. So God wins this decisive victory over pagan idols at Carmel here and the people's hearts are turned back to God.

The victory is so public and complete that at Elijah's command the people slaughter the prophets of Baal, and then the rains return ending the drought on the land. Elijah runs ahead of Ahab to the land of Jezreel announcing the end of the drought and the return of the King. It's possible now the King, Ahab, will follow Elijah and together shape the future of Israel through a renewal of the covenant.

It's an exciting moment. There's mystery, power, and hope... all that in 1 Kings 18.

Alas, it was not to be - as you know from 1 Kings 19. (PAUSE) Have you ever seen that young child who goes home and tells his older sibling, sobbing, "You know Ted from school, he was picking on me all day" hoping the older sibling will go out and ruff up Ted?

Yea, well... that's what Ahab is doing in 1 Kings 19 that we read this morning. (SLIDE and EM) "Jezebel, that mean Elijah was picking on me, and killed all our prophets!" And Jezebel is maaaaaaaaaad (SLIDE no kidding). She is incensed, incited against Elijah and God now. So she sends word, "By this time tomorrow, I'll make you dead".

(SLIDE: Fear) A fear grips the prophet. Elijah's fight or flight response is activated at the threat of Jezebel ending his life, and we see that Flight wins the day.

Elijah takes off to Judah... some 100 miles south of where he was in Jezreel, leaving his servant in Beersheba along the way, then he took another day's travel into the wilderness to pray. Do you know what the average walking speed of a human is? 3-4 miles per hour. Elijah BOOKED it for Judah.

And what is his prayer when he gets there? **I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors**. How many of us have thrown up our hands after having one thing after another come at us, just when we think we can take a moment and breathe...

BAM, something else happens and we say, "I'm done, Lord. Take me away, I can't do this". I've been there, man alive have I been there. And man have I been there for others going through this time in their lives.

Burn out and overwhelming anxiety are top of the mental health charts these days - there are so many out there today in Elijah's fearful position facing the Jezebels of our modern era. We see the (SLIDE) power of the things coming at us, surrounding us, acosting us and we think its hopeless.

The fact of the matter is that the forces of evil do have a power about them. We like to say that evil has no power... but that expression has to be qualified with evil has no power BEFORE GOD... evil has power before us. Jezebel was able to slither and slink into Israel's powerful position using that power... and it's a sinful power that evil abuses to our downfall.

Jezebel used lust and greed to get God's people to turn their back on the One who freed them from slavery and guided them through to the Promised Land. We see other weapons of sin in the hands of evil forces...

Anger... Envy... Pride... Hatred... Unforgiveness... Impatience... to name a few. They are on display all over Scripture, though. And every time we see them, we see God's people suffer at their use. The allure of sin gives the Enemy a power. We are human, not perfect, and very suseptable to sin.

And those weapons haven't changed to this very day. We see it in corruptible politicians, bad leaders, and crooked cops. We see it in laws and bills that get passed which further restrict your every-day common person but benefit the lawmakers unilaterally.

We see it in the news, skewed reporting that shows a particular bent and side while cleverly obscuring through word and images the truth of things. We see it in the institutions and companies that report record earnings year after year while people starve in the streets.

If we were there beside Elijah we might be quick to remind him of what he just saw days before this moment, of what we just read minutes ago. We might remind Elijah of the mighty power of God who set a soaking wet bull offering on fire and consumed it before the entire assembly of Israel and the prophets of Baal.

We might remind Elijah of the power of God to end the drought and cause the rains to fall on Israel again. We might regale the Prophet with the story of Noah and the Ark... how the people thought Noah was foolish and a zealot - (PAUSE) until the rain started pouring.

We could tell the prophet the rousing tale of Joshua, marching around a city with impenetrable walls. The people inside probably laughed. But on that seventh day, when the walls began to topple, no one was laughing. When Jezebel comes on the attack and fear grips us, we might say...

(SLIDE) "**But you, Lord, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me. Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs. Rescue me from the mouth of the lions; save me from the horns of the wild oxen**".

When we start making waves in the plans of our enemies... they don't easily retreat. They typically redouble their efforts, thinking they can just outlast or overpower you. Sadly, Elijah thought that by proving to Israel that God was still very real and very much with them that it would be done, Jezebel and her evil would just disappear.

And I think for us, it's much the same. We get in there, down and dirty into the fight. We devote our time to beating back evil - we donate food to the hungry, we give our time to the food drive, we sign petitions to repeal bad laws, we join groups to help those in need of housing...

And we pray, and we listen for the Spirit, we discern. And we see a victory, we see some light shed in the darkness. And we think "Perfect... I can rest". But you can't. Because now that you've threatened the powers of evil - they're going to respond.

(EM PRAY) You grab your Bible... "**Lord, do not be far from me**". Those are your words of rescue right there. When we are in the pit and being attacked our strength is going to run out because we are human! We don't have infinite strength. We can be picked off by sin. So you've got to pray "God, **You are my strength**". Only God's strength is endless! Notice the Psalmist DOES NOT say 'God GIVE ME strength', that's a whole different prayer. No, God YOU ARE my strength.

You'd be in good company as well, because Psalm 22 is exactly the Psalm Jesus is quoted on from the cross. At the moment where all seemed lost, when the Enemy thought he had won - convincing fraile human beings that Jesus was nothing more than a blampheming man...

Jesus says in Matthew 27:46-47 (along with the other three gospels) while Jesus was on the cross "**About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' When some of those standing there heard this, they said. 'He's calling Elijah'**". There's a correlation here between Elijah and Jesus, the notion that somehow or in some way God had forsaken them when evil responded to losing its power. It comes back to Psalm 22.

Our reading from Psalm 22 is the turning point of the Psalm. Verse 19, "**But you, Lord, do not be far from me... Deliver me from the sword... Resuce me from the mouth of lions....**" is the summation of the first half...

In verse 22 the Psalm has turned because God answers prayer. "**I will declare your name to my people... You who fear the Lord, praise Him! He has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted... He has listened to my cry for help**".

And Elijah receives his help after he cries out "Take my life Lord, I've had enough". The Lord prepares food and rest for Elijah that he may be sustained. Angels tend to him, the Lord appears to Elijah and instructs him on where to go next and what to do.

For Jesus, his death ends his physical suffering and free's his spirit to do the mighty work it was meant to do. He is raised up in victory. He frees the righteous kept in Sheol, then Jesus begins to appear to many, including the Disciples, and the gift of the Holy Spirit is given for Pentecost.

You and I, today, are going to see evil push back. When we threaten to upset the ground evil treads on and challenge evil's authority by the mighty name of Jesus we are going to see a response. And it's going to get worse before it gets better... but I assure you, it does get better.

But you have to keep fighting. You cannot surrender... you cannot give up hope... the moment you do is when Jezebel wins and all you've fought for is lost. You are a child of God, you belong to Christ, you are Abraham's seed, and you are an heir according to the promise.

That promise assures you victory for the fight, and Heaven is your reward. Where the streets are safe, where sin is destroyed, where sadness and sorrow do not dwell - instead, it is God who dwells in every heart, lighting the whole realm. AMEN.