

GROWING AS GOD'S CHILD

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He walked down the dark, sterile hallway. Somewhere deep in the building, he heard a cry. Somewhere a door slammed, ending some sort of argument between two people. Room 312, said the sign on the door. He knocked.

In a bare room, she sat still on a metal chair, staring at the floor. There was nothing much in the room except for her seated in the chair, a bed, a few photographs of her family on the bedside table.

He had met her when he first came to the church. She had two young children, and a spouse who traveled a lot. She was the chair of one of the church committees. Here in room 312 of the state mental hospital, slumped in a chair, that seemed like a very long time ago.

It was late afternoon. The window had some sort of thick grille over it. Through the grille, he could see the sky greying. She had not turned on the light beside her bed, so the room was darkening as well.

That darkness in the world outside, in the little room, seemed to fit the mood. He had entered a darkened world where once bright spirits grow dim, and people can't find their way. He felt chilled. He, even he, who was in the business of words, had to claw and fumble for a word to say to her.

He didn't do well in the darkness where people lose their way, and it is hard to see which way to turn. He fears that he is a member of a church that doesn't do well in the dark.

Most of our theology is best suited for brighter days. Onward and upward. Faith is a way to make basically secure people even more secure. Religion is a means of evoking that best sense within us.

But what do we do when the shadows lengthen and the light fades, when we can't find our way to well, and words do not come easily?

Perhaps that is why not too many years ago, the mentally ill were incarcerated, imprisoned away from the rest of us. It is threatening for us to be in the presence of mental confusion, darkness, and the dread that sometimes sweeps over people. We have come to call it "mental illness" or "psychological distress", but somehow those clinical, clean words don't do justice to threat of such darkness.

It may be that such "darkness was what Elijah was experiencing in today's story from I Kings.

Everything was going along just fine when Elijah's life turned upside down. Just previous to today's reading, Elijah and the Israelites were keenly aware of God's presence and then life fell apart.

Elijah became so utterly discouraged, dispirited and depressed, so much so that he wanted die. He goes into the wilderness hoping for death as an end to his pain. But that was not to be. God sends a messenger who ministers to him and his is strengthened to risk the next of the journey.

Elijah is not miraculously cured of his weariness, sense of failure, lack of passion and vitality. He laments, “I am left alone and they are seeking my life to take it away. “ It’s not the Israelites seeking Elijah’s life as he thinks.

In reality it is Jezebel who is after him.

God invites Elijah into a cave, where he experiences a manifestation of God that comes not in the spectacular but in the sound of sheer silence.

In that silence, Elijah realized that God was with him. God had never left him.

Then in today’s gospel, Jesus is out somewhere among the Gerasenes, out in Galilee, out in gentile territory, out on the fringe, away from home and its security. There Jesus meets a man on the fringe, a man who has lost that thin veneer of rationality by which we determine the “sane” from the “insane”. He’s a man living in darkness.

The man is in chains to protect him from self-destruction, or harm of others. Those chains signify his condition in his mental misery. They have named “Legion” because his personality is fragmented into so many parts.

The demons speak out to Jesus begging Jesus not send them back to the dark abyss from which they came. Present here, in the poor, tormented and bound man; they are themselves the presence of the power of darkness.

They beg Jesus to let them leave into a herd of swine. The whole tone of the story portrays a shadowy, confused, strange sort of place in which we rather secure, sensible church people would rather not go.

The man is healed of his illness and the witnesses are frightened. They have learned to live with the presence of demons and evil spirits. Jesus upsets the status quo, and this generates fear – perhaps creates another kind of darkness for some in the community. How do we treat this man now?

“Go home and tell your people what God has done for you,” Jesus told the healed man. And he did.

So how do these stories fit into today’s world? We need to acknowledge that many people today find themselves coping with depression and I can’t help but wonder if the depression goes hand in hand with what we might name as demons or evil in today’s world. Trying to keep up socially, economically, trying to fit into the moulds that all of today’s advertising says we should fit into, creates so much stress – stress that can drive us into caves of despair.

It’s really difficult to openly speak about despair and depression. Like the person in the story I began with today, we don’t always know the words; we don’t always know to offer support as Elijah’s angel did. But perhaps we don’t need to speak. Perhaps we can just be there, sitting the silence, offering the ministry of presence – God’s presence working through us.

Paul writes to the Galatians, “In Christ Jesus we are children of God through faith.” God’s grace is for all.

On this day named National Aboriginal Day, on this day where we promise to support Alexander and all children in our care, on this day where the lectionary readings remind us that even in the darkest times God is with us, we are called to help others experience God and grow in faith. May this be so. May we always be God’s children growing in faith.

Amen.