

SECRETS

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The Second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7)
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A case can be made that Elijah is the most ubiquitous person in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. He battled with idols and their prophets, went up against a queen and barely escaped with his life, flew up to heaven in a chariot of fire inside a whirlwind when he died—probably the most dramatic exit in scripture—but showed up again chatting with Jesus at the Transfiguration, and continues to be present at all Jewish circumcisions and is expected at all Passover seders. There was no rest for this prophet in life, and not much rest-in-peace for him since he died.

He wrote nothing that was preserved, but here is a bit of history about him. He arrived on the stage of Israel's history about 800 years before the birth of Jesus, dressed in a rough garment of haircloth with a leather girdle about his loins. We know little about his life before that, only that he appeared suddenly, acting decisively and dramatically when faithfulness to Yahweh was threatened, sort of like a Holy Batman, if you will.

Miracle upon miracle is attributed to his ministry, but even so, he was quite human. Our reading today begins with “Ahab told Jezebel, his wife, all that Elijah had done, how he had killed all the prophets”—but of course that was in retaliation for Jezebel's killing of the Lord's prophets. The details of the story are not in our lectionary—you have to dig deep into the book of I Kings to find it. The Church would rather not mention the mutual slaughters any more than necessary. The point of hearing as much as we do today is that Elijah heard the “still small voice” (to quote an older translation of the Bible), that God found him even in the hidden recesses of a cave, and directed him to get back to work. We, apparently, do not need to know the background story. The dirty little secrets...

A few years ago, I attended a diocesan clergy retreat. In the course of discussion in a plenary session, it came out (slipped out is more accurate) that a former bishop had had a long history of serious sexual misconduct, which was news to most of us. In the next session, the current bishop noted that the diocese had spent considerable money and energy covering up that story, thereby making his victims twice assaulted: the second time by secrecy.

And you know, if you've been listening to the January 6th hearings, and the many comparisons made in these last weeks to Watergate, that the people who we elect to run our country also have secrets—and not just the strategic secrets that are necessary at high levels, but dangerous, selfish secrets that harm others. The government, and the Church, are full of secrets, and while we do not by any means need to know them all, we do need to know when something has gone wrong and that something else is happening to rectify that wrong.

But of course, it is not just institutions that harbor secrets. Each one of us, myself included, harbors secrets that, God forbid, no one else ever hears. In the work that I do with spirituality and aging—I've been working with a Congregational church in Hamden, CT for the last six months—the first thing I have them do is review their lives and name—NAME on paper—the blessings AND the regrets of their past because as Hugh Hefner once said—yes, *that* Hugh Hefner—“You can't know where you are if you don't know where you've been.” Secrets can be debilitating.

The Christian writer Frederick Buechner has written extensively about the secrets kept in his own family and the harm done, secrets about his father's suicide, his daughter's alcoholism, his own inability to deal with such things. In a book called *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale* he writes this:

“ ‘God said let there be light, and there was light’ (Gen. 1:3) ... [good preachers] preach the word of human tragedy, of a world where men can at best see God only dimly and from afar, because it is truth and because it is a word which must be spoken as prelude if the other word is to become sacramental and real, too, which is the word that God has overcome the dark world.” *God has overcome the dark world.*

Today, in addition to Father’s Day, we celebrate a brand new national holiday that has its roots in keeping secrets. We celebrate Juneteenth and the revelation to those enslaved men and women in Texas that they were free, and had been for several years. It is said that some of them simply dropped their tools and walked away, never to return, while others demanded they be paid for the work they had done since Emancipation. In one documented case, a man named Jourdan Anderson calculated that he was owed a whopping \$11,680 for all the work he’d done for his “owner.” (No record of whether he’d been paid.)

Back to Elijah: he ran and hid deep in a cave, but God found him. Despite his own sins and secrets, he was still God’s prophet and there was more work for him to do. He was told to anoint new kings who would rule over a more faithful Israel. He was sent to find Elisha and appoint him as his own successor, and 800 years later and to this day, faithful Jews wait for Elijah to come and point to the Messiah as he did at the Transfiguration, and to the Messianic Age as he does at circumcisions and seders. No secret about it.

The point is that God knows all secrets and in their due time, brings light into the darkness. We can hover in the cave of our transgressions, or the stories we’re loathe to expose, but God knows all, and in that knowledge is God’s freedom. Listen to that “still, small voice” in your own mind and spirit, and know that you are known, loved, forgiven, commissioned, and in that is freedom.

At the beginning of every service of Holy Eucharist, we hear the Collect for Purity. We know it so well that in its familiarity, we tend to lose its meaning. Hear it again now:

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known and from you no secrets are hid:
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit that we may perfectly
love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Readings: 1 Kings 19:1-15a; Psalm 42; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39