

## Confessing Lips, Believing Hearts

Although the majority of the time the title given to the sermon will come from something I have read in a commentary on a text that I will read or from one of those texts itself, this title is a bit different. This title comes from a verse from the passage from Romans which I will not read...although I will give you the verse and then why it caught my attention. The Epistle passage for this morning is Romans 10: 5-15. In it Paul is writing to the believers in Rome about his understanding of faith, justification by faith, and the way salvation works for those of the Jewish tradition who have remained under the Law of Moses. The particular verse that caught my attention was 9: "Because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Although Paul connects these two events for those who have come to God through Jesus, his understanding that the covenant made with Abraham will hold because God's promises are eternal and unchangeable. It is the importance of the connection between what is confessed with our lips and believed in our hearts that caught my attention. It has seemed to me that our society has a problem with what is called by the generation to which my children belong as synchronization. That process of the smooth melding of things...like matching what we say with what we do. If we truly believe that Jesus is Lord, which is what we confess we say that we are Christian and his followers and his disciples, then those things that we do should be in accordance to what we find in our scriptures that he called us to do. Now, you are probably wondering how this relates to either of the two texts which were read. Actually, it relates to both. First, let's look at the text from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings. This comes from a point just after what was probably the highest point in Elijah's time as a prophet in Israel. His call to speak the word of the Lord came at a difficult time. Israel was actually a prosperous nation, but had turned to the worship of Baal under the rule of Ahab and his Egyptian wife, Jezebel. During a drought, Elijah challenges the priests of Baal to a duel of sorts which he wins, and then the drought ends. To celebrate his victory he has all the priests of Baal killed. This brings down the wrath of Jezebel, the queen upon him and he flees for his life. This is the point where this passage begins: Elijah is hiding in a cave when the word of the Lord comes to him. What is this word? Is it a word of praise? Is it a word of comfort? What comes is a question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Now, Elijah responds telling the Lord just what has gone on...as if God didn't know. Elijah is offering excuses for his coming and hiding in the cave. He is told to go out and stand on the mountain for the Lord will pass by. He does and several things happen. There was a great wind which was "splitting mountains and breaking rocks into pieces"; followed by an earthquake and a fire and the Lord was not present in them. Then there was sheer silence and Elijah at the entrance to the cave heard a voice asking "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah's answer is the same. This time the Lord gives him an answer: and the answer is that he is to continue doing the Lord's work. "Go, return"...and then describes several tasks that he is to perform. Elijah has been called by God to be God's voice to a people who do not want to hear it. He has been faithful to his call and God has provided and then he reaches this point. Suddenly he flees without waiting for instructions from the Lord. He has traveled quite a way in his panic, but what is interesting is that when he arrives at this cave...guess what...God is there waiting on him to show up. And isn't that exchange interesting. God doesn't berate Elijah for his lack of trust in fleeing. God asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah offers excuses for his behavior, like we usually

do; lifting up all the things that he has done right. The Lord's response given through that voice doesn't seem to respond to what Elijah says. Instead he is told just to wait for the Lord is about to pass by where he is. What happens then is a listing of powerful events in nature. Then out of what is described as sheer silence the Lord asks Elijah the same question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Perhaps you would think that after a reminder of God's power, Elijah might have a different answer about why he fled. But Elijah's response is the same. Now, however, the Lord's response is to give Elijah another mission or rather to confirm his mission to be the word of the Lord to the people of Israel: "Go, return." He is sent back to Damascus with purpose to move forward the agenda of the Lord. He is to anoint another king and another prophet to take his place in the future. And Elijah goes resuming his role. He anoints Elisha and continues as the prophet of the Lord. This narrative is important in several ways for it demonstrates that even when our trust wavers, God is present with us. God's response to our prayers may not be the answer we have drafted for ourselves, but God is present with us and will provide strength and support...even if it is to send us back out into the storm. Elijah probably expected the victory on Mount Carmel to totally defeat the prophets of Baal and Jezebel, but when it didn't work out like he expected, he panicked. God still had work for him to do, and after this period of despair, he returned and continued that work having been shown by God that the task was not yet completed. The reading from Matthew's gospel is a much more familiar text. In fact, it is a favorite one depicted in scenes on Sunday school wall paintings. In the paintings Jesus, who is standing on the surface of the water is shown holding out a hand to raise a sinking Peter. Depending upon the particular artist's vision, the stormy nature of the waves may vary, the nearness of the boat may vary, as may the number and expressions of the other disciples. But in each case, the focus is on the fear on Peter's face and the fact that he is sinking. The obvious connection here to the 1<sup>st</sup> Kings' passage about Elijah is the faltering of Elijah's trust which led him to flee Jezebel's wrath. And the usual focus taken about this passage as exemplified by the numerous paintings found in our buildings is about that fear and failure of trust, yet there is something else here for us as well. Something that we perhaps need more. The passage from Matthew begins where last week's text ends. Jesus has come to this location, a deserted place, looking for solitude and instead found crowds seeking his aid. He has responded to them with compassion, and has shown the disciples how to respond and provide abundance in the face of scarcity...a theme he proclaims about the reign of God. Having accomplished this, he dismisses the crowds and then sends his disciples away; making them get back into the boat and head back across to the other side. He goes up to the top of the mountain alone to pray. It was already late when he fed the crowds, and when Jesus has finished praying we are told that it now early morning. The disciples, in the boat have not fared very well during this time. They are being battered by the waves, but evidently the wind is against them and they are still far from land. This is the scene: the frightened disciples are in the boat and Jesus comes walking toward them on the sea. The disciples, if not frightened by being buffeted by the waves and wind, are described as terrified by what they perceive as a ghost. However, Jesus speaks to them telling them not to be afraid. The text describes what happens this way: "Peter answers him, 'Lord, If it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat and started walking on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and

caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'" That is the familiar scene. That is usually our focus; on the doubt that causes Peter to sink. Yet there was something in Peter that made him willing to get out of the boat in the first place. That Peter lost his focus, was distracted by the wind and became frightened is definitely a part of the story. But he did want to get out of the boat and join Jesus. And when he got frightened, Jesus did not give up on him. Instead, he immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" The question is a little different from that asked of Elijah, but not much? What are you doing here, Elijah? There are a couple of times when it is clear that scriptures give us glimpses that those chosen to do the things God has chosen them to do are going to be sent into unpleasant situations, there will be trials, not everything will be smooth. In fact, a serious examination of most of the lives of the prophets yields that information. It also yields the information that God is present with them through whatever it is that they face. That conviction that the Lord is with us, that the Lord calls us into a certain way of life, and that way of life is a preparation for citizenship within the kingdom is the connection to this sermon's title. If we confess with our lips and believe with our hearts that Jesus is Lord, that the gospel message Jesus proclaimed is true and the way of our redemption, then we are called to live according to the ways of that kingdom trusting in God's presence with us as we proclaim and live faithfully. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.