

Under the solitary broom tree

1Kings 19:3-5 & 11-18

Mark 1:21-28

January 31, 2021

Last Sunday our new interim bishop asked us a question that where and when we recognize the presence of Jesus, the light of the world, and then he shared his story of when and how he recognized Jesus' presence in his life. It was his calling story to Christian faith. He also invites us to share our calling stories to Christian faith and life. As a response to his plea to think about and share our stories with others I am going to share my story today with you. One of many remarkable things about recognizing the presence of Jesus in the world or in us is not limited to good, peaceful, kind, faithful, or worthy people. Maybe it is vice versa. In today's gospel reading we see that a person with an evil spirit, a demon, recognized Jesus. Why is that? Why not those faithful Pharisees in the synagogue that day? Why was it the person with an evil spirit, someone unworthy and unclean? I believe it is all about grace. The demon who occupied the man knew that Jesus cared for the person no matter what mental, social and physical state he was in. The demon recognized the amazing grace of Jesus. I believe I had the same experience with God's grace.

I was born and grew up in Seoul, Korea. My father's father was the first Christian, a Methodist, in his family and hometown in North Korea. He had four daughters and two sons. Because of his conversion to Christianity, he sent all his daughters to higher education to be a teacher, a nurse, and a medical doctor. It was rare to educate daughters in his time. My favorite story of him is that he cried when his oldest daughter was rejected to get into a high school because she was short. He has been a model Christian for me who lived according to what he learned and believed in Christianity and who had compassion for the rejected by the systems of the society. My father worked at the headquarter of Methodist missionaries in Seoul. My three siblings and I had lots of American toys, attended a private school, and took piano, ballet, or violin lessons. We had a comfortable life. But when I was ten years old my father left the family. My mom sold one by one whatever she had to make a living. We moved many times, each time to a smaller and cheaper place. My mom constantly worried about how to feed her four children. In that situation I was hiding in a small world of my imagination, away from the hardship of life. I daydreamed and read books in my small, lonely, and solitary world. There, I tried to figure out, or make sense, or make meanings of myself, life and the world. At that time, I didn't know that I was slowly slipped into a depression struggling with a demon whispering to my ears that life is meaningless.

After college graduation, my depression got worse, and suicidal, but I didn't talk about it to anyone. I even didn't know something was really wrong with me. One late spring day I decided that I had enough and tried enough. There was no regret or sadness. I just felt I was exhausted and done. I went to a small mountain behind the apartment where we lived. I sat under a tree. I was prepared and ready. Before I died, I wanted to pray, though I learned that a suicide was a sin. I just wanted to talk to God one last time. I said, "God, there is no meaning in my life. I tried everything to find a reason or meaning to live. I found none. Nothing. I am OK, God. Please take my life." There was no one walking around, no wind, no animals. It was quiet and peaceful. Then, I heard a voice saying, "Remember Elijah. When he thought he was only one left, there were seven thousand people who have not bowed their knees to Baal. Go back home. I hid seven thousand meanings for you and until you find all of them you don't die." I was

like, “what is this and who is Elijah?” I was only 22 years old and I didn’t know the Bible well enough to know who Elijah was.

I came home and read the Bible to find Elijah. His story was in 1Kings, chapter 19 that we read this morning. He was passionate for God and fought for his God. But he was exhausted. He ran away from the king and queen who tried to kill him. He ran and ran and finally sat down under a solitary broom bush. He longed for his own death. He complained to God that he was only one left, and everyone turned away from God and murdered prophets, like him. That’s when he heard the voice telling him to go back the way he came, because there were still works for him to do and there were seven thousand people that God preserved. God was not done with him yet.

After I came back home and found this story in the Bible my life was still the same, lonely and didn’t know where to go and what to do. But I was determined to find something meaningful whatever it is that God prepared for me. I went to a graduate school to study political science again. That was my only passion that I could think of. At that time, I never thought I could, would, or wanted to be a pastor. Calling to be a pastor was not in my world of imagination. That happened later after I came to America in 1988 to join my family in Chicago. My uncle arranged a job for me even before I got here. I worked at a Korean language newspaper as a reporter for about three years. One day I was reading a letter from one of readers from Wisconsin. In his letter he talked about a Korean woman pastor of the United Methodist Church in his small town. He said this Korean woman pastor became famous in his town because she was the only one non-white woman pastor. When I read the letter, I was shocked that a woman could be a pastor. Until that time I didn’t meet a woman pastor. My heart was pumping and getting bigger and bigger feeling like it would jump out of my throat. I quit the job right away because if I thought about it long time, I might have changed my mind. I didn’t have money to go to seminary, but I prayed to God if it was a calling for me to be a pastor please open the door. I got admission and got full scholarship by the grace of many generous donors. Glenview UMC is my fifth church as a pastor. It has been all by the amazing grace of God.

I imagine how the person in today’s gospel reading who had an evil spirit was. He might have had some mental health issues. He could be depressed like Elijah. He could be isolated from others or in solitary because of his illness. But that day, he was in the synagogue when he encountered Jesus. In spite of his many issues, he had a yearning for God’s presence and was in the synagogue. During the current pandemic, the isolation has been too long, almost one year. We suffer in isolation with all kinds of mental health issues. We may feel exhausted, anxious, and worried. But we still gather as a faith community as the man with an evil spirit did. We still pray as Elijah did. And one day we may hear the voice of hope that life is beautiful and meaningful even in a dark time. We may encounter the presence of Jesus’ healing touch. It is all by the grace of God.

Later in the letter to Romans Paul explains Elijah’s experience under the solitary broom bush. When Elijah believed there was no one, no hope, no solution, God kept seven thousand people who haven’t bowed their knees to Baal. Paul says it is by God’s grace. Paul knew it by his own experience of encountering resurrected Christ. Today, I am standing here bringing this message of hope to you by God’s grace. We keep moving on even in dark nights of life toward the light. It is all by the grace of God. Thanks be to God.