Sermon
Sunday, October 6, 2019

I love the story of Oklahoma native and former heavy-weight boxer James Quick Tillis as he recalls the day he moved to Chicago. "I get off the bus with two suitcases under my arms in downtown Chicago and stop in front of the Sears Tower. I put my suitcases down, look up at the Tower and say to myself, 'I am going to conquer Chicago.' It was my moment of glory! And then I looked down. My suitcases were stolen."

Can't we just picture the scene? It's one of the most difficult challenges of our lives, one simple word: DISCOURAGEMENT. Discouragement is a great obstacle to what it means to flourish and can lead to oppression and a heaviness like humidity in our soul. Discouragement is capable of bringing you down, even into a place of depression. If you've ever been there or are there right now, you're not alone.

According to reporter Ted Anthony writing on the United Nations General Assembly's meeting last week, "The world is discouraged. The planet is heating. Island nations are slipping away. A Pakistan-India nuclear war could be a bloodbath.” Then he quotes the secretary general Antonio Guterres who said, "We are living in a world of 'DIS-QUIET' - where a great many people fear traffickers taking their dignity, demagogues taking their rights, warlords taking their lives, and Fossil fuels their future."

Global discouragement. Or maybe your discouragement is more personal. Discouragement stemming from a difficult relationship in the home, at work, or at school. Or unmet dreams, expectations not met, or thinking your best days are behind you!

Last week I was joined by 25 St. Michaelites at the New Wineskins Global Anglican Conference on Mission. 1200 Anglicans from 50 nations, with one focus - winning the world for Christ - beginning with our own families at home! On the one hand it was so encouraging to see and worship with that many Anglicans in one place! Clergy, Laity, young and old, black and white - a true vision of heaven! On the other hand, so discouraging. Why? It was reported that 68% of our world is still un-reached by the Gospel, and if we believe that Jesus is the ONLY hope for the world, it can get one down!

Case in point, one of the many workshops that was offered was on college ministry. It was reported that in our country, only 2% of college students are being reached by a campus ministry of some kind, and 77% of college campuses have no campus ministry of ANY kind. Discouraging! That is mission missing in our own backyard!

Now some of you may be thinking, well, I was encouraged before I came to church, now you have me discouraged! My point is this, if you've ever been discouraged, or depressed for whatever reason, know you are not alone. For so it was with ELIJAH! This is what I love about the Bible, it holds nothing back, even about discouragement. Yes, Elijah, that Old Testament Prophet out of our reading from Kings, is a poster child of discouragement.

We catch up with him in a cave where he had spent the night. He yells to God, "I am the only one left in the world who believes in you God." Okay, what was really going on, and who is this depressed Prophet? Elijah is one the most fascinating and colorful people in the Bible. While we don't know much about him, we DO know that God gave him a job description that was ALMOST undoable. His mission was to confront the evil King Ahab. But Ahab wasn't really the problem. It was Ahab's wife who was the problem, the evil, dreaded murderous Jezebel. She ranks as THE most evil woman in all the Bible. Jezebel was a bad bad woman, who worshiped the false god Baal, and she wore the pants in the family. She convinced, for instance, her Jewish husband to abandon his faith and worship Baal. She also managed 850 pagan priests who she wanted to use to exterminate the worship of God in Israel and would execute anyone who stood in her way. By the way, this is why you probably can't name one single woman in your life named Jezebel. It just has a bad ring to it even these thousands of years later!

Well, Jezebel had one thorn in her side - Elijah. Elijah, in 1 Kings 18, won a contest proving that Baal didn't exist and that the God of Israel was Lord. We don't have time to go into that now, except to say that because Baal never showed up and God did, Elijah orders the death of all those Baal Prophets. And Jezebel, their benefactor, is LIVID! She issues a death warrant on Elijah's life saying, "May the gods deal with me ever so severely if by this time tomorrow, I do not take your life Elijah." Elijah is filled with fear and discouragement and runs for his life into the cave that starts our passage for today. Which is fascinating, Elijah wasn't afraid of all those hundreds of pagan priests, but Jezebel: Run for your life!

Okay, now that I've brought us all down, let me pick you back up! The rest of chapter 19 is how God lifts Elijah out of the cave of discouragement, literally! God comes to Elijah and says, "What's going on Elijah?" Isn't this beautiful? God cares about our hearts and minds. He knows our deepest discouragements and anxieties. Think how personal that is. God knows what you're thinking. And Elijah responds with great honesty, and holds nothing back from...
God. “I’ve been working my heart out for you God, yet everyone has abandoned you, they’ve destroyed the places of worship, I’m the only one left, and now they’re trying to kill me.” Pure honesty. This tells us YOU CAN speak your heart to God. He won’t be angry or offended. In the throes of Elijah’s discouragement, God not only hears Elijah’s pain, but He gives two ways for Elijah to defeat the discouragement. Two ways that work even for us.

First, God says go to Mt. Horeb. I’ll meet you there. So, Elijah, in his dis—quieted heart, walks to the top and once there, he’s faced with high winds, earthquakes, and fire. After all that, comes a gentle voice. God whispers to Elijah, “What’s on your mind?” God wasn’t in the earthquake, wind, or fire, meaning, He’s not in the hustle and bustle of life. Elijah had to be intentional about going to the mountain top, and wait for the quiet. The first way out of discouragement: “Go to the mountain top and wait for the quiet.”

Now, I know the closest thing to a mountain in the lowcountry is the Ravenel bridge. That’s not what we’re talking about. The mountain top is that daily place where we pray in our home, away from the hustle and bustle, slowing down in order to hear the voice of God. It’s prayer from a designated place and time where you stop to listen. Fathers-Mothers, especially in our First Communion class, All parents here, all grand and god parents, if mission begins in the home, this becomes our chief role in the home. slow the family down and let God speak INTO the condition of our hearts whatever it is.

But, you might say, “But Al, I never hear the voice of God speak to me when I stop.” Okay but notice in verse 9, when Elijah is in the midst of his discouragement, the bible says, The Word of the Lord came to Elijah. When we gather our families on the daily mountain top, we’re not there to twiddle our thumbs, but to hear the WORD OF THE LORD. This is why the Gospel Project readings are like gold, readings given out every Sunday in your pew, to be the voice of God for your daily mountain tops. One father in the First Communion class yesterday told me his mountain top Bible Reading to his children happens in the Car Pool Line. FANTASTIC! If we’re not taking our family up the mountain each day, something destructive happens. We begin to believe those 4 am voices pouring in that say, “There is no hope for you. You’re a failure.” These words of discouragement run on a constant loop. They are lies, but they don’t stop, they are relentless! Remember Elijah’s 4 am voice? I don’t have a chance! There is no one left on earth who loves God! But in the quiet, what does God say? Elijah, that’s a lie! There are 7,000 of you left, don’t believe the lies. Mountain Top time stops the loop!

So, the first way out of discouragement is mountain time, carving time away from the hustle and bustle to marinate in the Word of God. In other words, LOOK UP!!!

The second way out of discouragement is to LINK UP! Act on what He tells you! God gives Elijah a DO. Someone once said, “Everyone needs three things: someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to.” God says LINK UP with me Elijah, “I need you to anoint three people.” There’s the do.

I love Linda Prince’s new book. Linda is a St. Michaelite and her new book called “Inklings” features a woman named Ntombi on a spiritual quest from Africa to America. Often when Ntombi was perplexed, she would follow her Father’s advice: Pray...then do the next thing, do the next thing, do the next thing. This is what Elijah hears from God, LINK UP! Pray, and do the next thing, by anointing three people. Hazael, who will help defeat Israel’s enemies. Jehu, who will defeat whoever is left of the Baal worshipers. And Eli-SHA, who will succeed you, ELI-JAH. In other words, stop the naval gazng and get into action for the sake of others. Elijah obeys, and the results are amazing:

Hazael would recapture all of Israel’s lost possessions. Jehu would throw Jezebel out of an upper story window, where she died trampled by horses and eaten by dogs. And Elisha, well, Eli-JAH develops Eli-SHA as a leader and that mentorship of another, mentoring another, linking up that way defeats ELI-JAH’s own discouragement!

So, mountain top - out of the hustle and bustle. Do the next thing, obey His words. Look up. Link up. Take the Word of God to others and in doing so you will find your life and peace. But we can’t do this under our own strength. Just over 900 years later, another man came on the scene. Unlike Elijah, this man was truly alone in His darkest hour, and those who sought his life took it from Him on the cross. But Jesus Christ rose again, and in doing so has given us the power to defeat discouragement and the Jezebels and to transform our world! Jesus has given us the power of the Holy Spirit to look up and Link Up. For our first communion families, for all of us. This is why we come to communion each week, to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, and to remember who is in charge of our lives over the lies. But also, receiving the very Body and Blood of Jesus gives us the strength to look up and into His Word daily as a family, and to link up, engaging in doing the next thing as a family.

Now here’s the secret sauce. Discouragement is often greatest right before a break through. On that note, let me take you back to New Wineskins last week. I’m in the workshop on college ministry feeling a bit discouraged. Two percent of college students have no ministry. That’s when the leader of the workshop says, “Okay, now we’re going to pray” and so we prayed, we LOOKED UP. Then the leader said, “Okay now we’re going to do something. We’re going to take a prayer walk around our nearest college campus.” Yes, a prayer walk, where you just walk around the campus quietly in prayer, FOR the campus. So our little workshop LINKS UP by getting into cars and going to the nearest college, one I had never heard of, Warren Wilson College. And by golly, as we prayer walked, as we got into action, I could feel my dis—quiet and my discouragement lift! I left with a new found joy! But that’s not even the half of it! The next day, I was riding back to Charleston with the Rev. Richard Grimball, who takes a call from his wife Paige. Paige was here attending a small reunion of friends and said, “Our reunion might be cut short because one of my friends has to leave early because her niece, a college student, is being baptized.” And by the way, she attends Warren Wilson College! Paige had no idea about our prayer walk. And I don’t know anything about her friends or the baptism. All I know is that this is how God works, his economy is such that through the Holy Spirit, when we look up, and link up, miracles happen, discouragement fades, breakthroughs hit, and we are left in awe of the RAW POWER of JESUS CHRIST!

Look up. Link up. Communing with Christ as our strength. Let us pray.

Transforming Hearts Through Jesus Christ