

Have you ever seen the sun shining out behind the clouds? On Monday evening I was driving through Rappahannock Country and I saw the biggest cloud and behind it was the sun shooting forth. It lit up every corner of the cloud. This image reminded me of the kingdom of God in heaven. It was a reminder that the saints of the Lord are continuing to look down from heaven cheering us on as we practice our faith even during this time.

Have you ever felt like the saints are watching you and cheering you on? Maybe it happens to you in church when you sing the favorite song of your loved one who has passed away. Or perhaps you have this feeling when you are remembering a loved one.

Our Scripture for today reminds us that the saints are always around the edges of our faith. So today we celebrate some of the unsung heroes of the Bible who paved the way so that we could be where we are today.

In the book “Acts: Catching Up With the Spirit” Matthew Skinner says: “The people who operate at the fringes of the plot may not receive as much attention as [the main characters], but they are equally important to our understanding of what the first generations of believers did to help build the new society that God’s Spirit was creating among them.”ⁱ

Skinner reminds us that we owe our gratitude to many Christians who came before us so that we could find ourselves in our places of worship today. These saints remind us that Christ’s ministry of resurrection is happening all around us if only we look for it.

The first unsung hero or saint that we celebrate today is Elijah. Elijah was a prophet who was known for “awesome and, at times, outrageous deeds.”ⁱⁱ If you were to read his prophet resume it would state that he had taken part in some miracles. One of the most notable stories about Elijah in the Bible is when he came across a widow who was making a final meal for herself and her son, since she found herself without food.ⁱⁱⁱ

When Elijah heard her sad story, he had the audacity to ask her to make him some bread first. She did this and somehow the widow and her son never ran out of flour and oil ever again.

And when her son died, with God’s help Elijah was able to bring him back to life.^{iv} When the widow met Elijah, she thought her life was over, but ultimately, she experienced resurrection.

Our Scripture for today from 1 Kings 19 shows an important moment in the Bible. It is the moment Elisha is called to do the work of the Lord. Now this is an interesting call story to say the least.

Elisha is in the field minding his own business. He is taking care of his oxen when all of the sudden Elijah shows up, throws him a mantle which is a garment, and keeps going. And yet somehow, Elisha understands the significance of this moment. In fact, commentary tells us Elisha’s response to his call: that he “sacrifices...the tools of his trade, slaughtering the oxen, and using the equipment that comes with them for fuel.”^v

Elisha had been chosen by God to complete the work of the prophet Elijah. Elisha is an important unsung hero of the Bible because he followed God’s call and took part in God’s ministry of resurrection. Elisha also helped to bring someone back from the dead.

Elisha had befriended a Shunammite woman who looked after him. She would provide meals for him when he passed through town and even created a place in her home for him to stay and rest. The woman went on to have a son, but one day the son died. The woman came running to Elisha and he came and with the help of God brought her son back to life.

The saints in our lives have a way of reminding us that we are part of God’s work in the world. This is the lesson that Elijah instilled in Elisha. Today we too are called to be Christians who participate in God’s ministry of resurrection.

In the book of Acts, we meet two other unsung heroes: Aquilla and Priscilla. Skinner tells us that: “Aquilla and Priscilla were a power couple in the early church...They were traveling missionaries, teachers, and hosts of a house church.”^{vi} Unlike Elijah and Elisha they did not bring people back to life, but they did help build up the kingdom of God with words of life.

There is an old hymn called “Wonderful Words of Life” and the chorus goes: “beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life.” Priscilla and Aquilla spoke these wonderful words of life over Apollos. Apollos was a passionate Christian who wanted to preach the good news of Jesus Christ, but as Scripture tells us he was not quite theologically sound. He had the passion, but he did not yet have the wisdom.

So, Priscilla and Aquilla spent time teaching him. They did not embarrass him or rebuke him, they encouraged him.

We see later in this same passage that others encouraged him as well and he grew to become a theologically sound and powerful preacher all because some saints of the church spent some time with him. Priscilla and Aquilla are heroes because they took time to notice that Apollos had gifts for preaching. They knew that he was capable, but he just needed some more time to learn.

The other unsung heroes were the community that gathered around Apollos as he continued to answer God’s calling upon his life.

In this response of faith, we see that often the community of faith as a whole are the saints around the edges because in our Christian communities, we create a beautiful culture of encouragement and life.

We too are blessed to witness the saints around the edges. Today these saints are taking the forms of healthcare workers on the front lines of COVID, of teachers and administrators, as people who work in nursing homes ensuring the safety of their residents. We see that anyone working to preserve the lives of vulnerable persons are our unsung heroes.

Who are the unsung heroes in your life? Perhaps it is one of the saints of the church who has passed on, or maybe it is even someone in this room who instructed you in the faith and encouraged you.

God is calling all of us to be saints around the edges. This means that God is calling us to notice those who are in need of encouragement or hope; those who are in need of hearing words of life. We forget so often that people are more used to hearing words of death.

In her book: “Be Bold: Finding Your Fierce,” Rev. Rachel Billups describes that words of death were spoken to her early on in her ministry through what she calls a “limitation prophecy.”^{vii} She describes a limitation prophecy as words that are spoken that “limit your view of yourself and the world around you.”^{viii}

In seminary I became best friends with a girl named Ashley who had experienced a “limitation prophecy” spoken over her life. She had grown up in a faith tradition that did not support women in ministry and would never allow them to preach. She had shared this with me and told me this is why she would not be pursuing ordained ministry, because for her she thought it was impossible.

But Ashley was a powerful preacher. We were in the same preaching class and when I heard her preach, I witnessed the good news of Jesus Christ being

embodied in her words of life. It was so strange and amazing seeing my best friend who I saw every day in this new light as prophet. When I shared with her that I thought her sermon was powerful she thanked me but seemed sad.

Ashley believed the words of death and “limitation prophecy” that had been spoken over her life. Ashley did not think she was good enough to fulfill God’s calling upon her life. When Ashley preached she felt like an imposter, and she was unable to see the evidence that God was calling her to preach, but I saw it and I felt confirmation from the Holy Spirit that I needed to tell her what happened to me when she preached.

Through this conversation with Ashley I heard her pain in the many no’s she had heard throughout her life due to her call. I could not believe it. I did not realize how blessed I was to grow up in a denomination and church that supported my calling to ministry. In that moment, I realized that many more people in the world were called, but because of their own doubt and the words of others they were not fulfilling God’s calling upon their lives.

I think it was in that moment that I realized that part of my calling in the world for God was helping these people who heard no from others who were clearly called to be able to answer God’s calling upon their lives. I was very frank and direct with Ashley as I told her that I thought she was called to ministry and that I wanted to be there the day she got ordained. She laughed saying that was not going to happen. But God.

This year I will stand by my friend Ashley (now virtually) as she becomes an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church. It has been a long road, but along the way Ashley stopped listening to the voices of others who clearly did not recognize her call and she started listening more to the voice of God.

I share this story with you because I do not want anything or anyone stopping you from participating in God’s ministry of resurrection. There are a million reasons to say no to God, but in our yeses to God we find peace, freedom, and a way forward with hope. Today Ashley serves at a large church and started a new worship service to reach people in her community. She is still a powerful preacher, prophet and deep lover of God’s people. I am so blessed to have Ashley in my life and am so thankful that her call was not silenced.

The good news for our lives today is that we have the opportunity to speak words of life to other each and every day. We do this through embodying the resurrection ministry of Jesus Christ. We are a people of life and hope!

Elijah embodied God’s ministry of life and passed it on to Elisha. Priscilla and Aquilla encouraged Apollos to remain faithful as he continued to answer his call. Now we are called to thank those saints around the edges in our lives who have gotten us to where we are today and we are called to encourage those in our community so they will not believe the words of death that they hear every day.

May we continue to be a community of believers who build up the kingdom of God on earth through our thoughts, words, and deeds. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Matthew Skinner. “Acts: Catching Up With the Spirit.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2020. P. 99.

ⁱⁱ Eric Elnes et al. The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible. Vol. 2. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2007. P. 241.

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Kings 17:7-16.

^{iv} I King 17:17-18.

^v Keck et al. The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible. Vol. 2. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015. P. 718.

^{vi} Matthew Skinner. “Acts: Catching Up With the Spirit.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2020. P. 99.

^{vii} Rachel Billups. “Be Bold: Finding Your Fierce.” Abingdon Press.

^{viii} Rachel Billups. “Finding Your Fierce” Promo Video. Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZHMql_DSm8.