

Sermon: Writing Love Letters

Year C, Proper 9

[2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:\(1-6\), 7-16; Luke 10:1-11,16-20](#)

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Back in May we started our semi-continuous reading of 1 and 2 Kings. 1 Kings starts with the death of King David. 2 Kings ends with the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians and the exile of the Israelites in Babylon. The books of 1 and 2 Kings were originally written as one book. It appears to have been the physical limitations of the size of a single scroll that forced the scribes to break the book into two. It was when the Israelites were sitting in exile in Babylon that they canonize their holy texts. Before there had been priests at the Temple in Jerusalem and at other sacred places. Part of the priests' responsibility was to transmit the sacred information across time reliably.

In an oral culture, unlike our written culture, memorization was a fairly safe and accurate way to hold onto information. So long as you could keep the people whose memory held what was important safe. And so long as you had a steady flow of people who could dedicate themselves to memorization, meaning they were not also struggling to feed and clothe themselves and their families. Exile in Babylon appears to have disrupted the human chain of custody of the sacred information. So the Israelites adapted. In essence, they switched technologies. They still had priests, but they began to write the information down. It's not just the work of the prophets like 1 and 2 Kings that gets written down, but the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, gets standardized during the exile in Babylon as well.

It seems so natural to us that you would write something down that you wanted to remember. We look at the ancient Israelites and we think, hey, they had pens and ink and animal skins and representational alphabets. They were already in use for legal and accounting systems. Moving to writing stuff down is obvious, inevitable. We can't see the size of the cataclysm that pushed the Israelites to give up on something that had worked for them for centuries.

We're here on July 3rd about to celebrate the transition from monarchy to representational democracy. We can look back at 1776 and say the switch was obvious, inevitable. But when the French try to make the same transition a few years later, it's a disaster. You look at the political scene from the founding of this nation to well past the Civil War and you see ugliness that makes our current political dysfunction look like an elegant garden party among dear friends. We are celebrating the transition from monarchy to representational democracy 240 years later precisely because it was not obvious or inevitable. We're celebrating that transition because it's still happening. We're still working together to keep that transition going.

So today, on our last Sunday with these books for a while, we need to be aware that they only come into being because there is a huge upheaval in their community, upheaval so great that it's not clear if the Israelites are going to survive at all. They are packing all their most important things into these written texts. And only the most important things are making it in.

The two books together are struggling with the question *how did things go so wrong from the great promise of King David to the point where we were conquered by Babylon?* The Israelites went looking for points in their history where they could have changed course, where they could have gone in another direction. Again and again, we see the Prophet Elijah trying to get the leaders of the Israelites to turn around. Again and again, we see him dismissed and more than

dismissed. We see him persecuted and hunted down. In last week's reading, we saw him vindicated, lifted up into heaven in a fiery chariot. As Charlene played *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* on her cello during the offeratory, I thought of all those prophets, from Elijah on down, who have battled and battled with the powers of this world and at the end have a feeling that someone or something is *coming for to carry them home*.

And if we were watching a made for TV movie, that's where the story would end. Elijah being called home to glory, vindicated, God expressing God's love for this man who stood up against the principalities and powers of this world. The music might begin with a haunting lone cello, but in no time there'd be brass and percussion and an entire orchestra swelling up behind the scene.

But in the Bible, the story continues on. Because Elijah had a disciple, Elisha. Elisha inherits Elijah's mantle. It's more than inheriting his cloak, because at the end of last week's reading, we saw Elisha part the Jordan River and walk to the other side dry foot, just like Elijah did. Elisha had asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit and it appears that he has received it.

So think for a minute about the presence of Elisha, Elijah's disciple, in the text. If you are trying to figure out how you ended up in exile in Babylon, Elijah's prophecies have provided all the off-ramps from disaster that any community could possibly need. If they had done what Elijah had told them to do, or even half of what he said, they would definitely be on a different track. So in a way, Elisha is completely unnecessary. And yet, in this text, which has been stripped down to the essentials, there he is.

Elisha is there, not simply pointing back, saying, "Elijah always said ...". Elisha is doing things that Elijah never did. In today's reading about the healing of Naaman, Elisha heals a non-Israelite through the power of the God of Israel. Naaman is an enemy of the people of Israel. And yet the God of Israel heals him, using the river that is at the heart of the land of Israel. Not only does the God of Israel working through Elisha heal this enemy of the people of Israel, the procedure is so easy that the patient rejects it. It's too simple to be true. As much as he is suffering, the cure should be just as awful. Elisha is going beyond Elijah, doing something new.

Why does this story make it in to the written collection, when so many others don't? There's a lot to notice in the details of the story of Naaman. But zoom out and look at the stories that are all written down during exile. For a defeated people, trying to come to grips with how it has all gone so wrong, I think the written stories all point to the same on-going theme. God is still sending love letters to the people of Israel, to us.

The Elisha narrative underlines that there was never a pause, never a lull, in how God expressed God's love for the people of Israel. They didn't heed Elijah. Well, there was Elisha, revealing a God whose love for creation was so great that God would cure an enemy of the people of Israel and make that cure easy into the bargain.

In today's reading from Luke, there is God's great love letter to all of Creation, Jesus. Jesus is sending his disciples out into the world. "Peace to this house" (Luke 10:5). There's a complete love letter right there. "Peace to this house". And even as Jesus is sending out his disciples, he knows that people will ignore the message God is sending through them. He tells them exactly what to do when they're not welcomed by whole towns. His disciples go out into the world and come back rejoicing. Make no mistake, they've been rejected in some of the places they've gone. But some of God's love letters have been opened and responded to.

The Gospel of Luke is written down in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans. The story of Jesus's life, death and resurrection is written down so that in further cataclysms, God's love letters to God's creation will still make it through.

Just like the ancient Israelites, just like the early Christians struggling in a world where they were persecuted for their beliefs, we look for God's love letters when a cataclysm enters our lives. As a minister, I have the privilege of joining families when they are in the heart of upheaval, when they sit in hospitals or in funeral homes, when someone they love is beyond their reach. The love letters pour in then, although we don't always notice. The casseroles arrive and the dishes disappear. The lawn is mysteriously mowed, the driveway plowed. The kids are picked up for the latest Disney movie. In those most awful days when we look around us and think *how did I end up here?*, there are love letters lying all around us.

So when I was asked to write a love letter this week as I thought about Elisha and those seventy disciples in Luke, I recognized it as something that is often desperately needed when families hit their personal cataclysm, something that when written down allows not only the information but the love to be transmitted. It is called *A Love Letter to My Family*. It's many pages long of fill in the blank questions. And mostly, it's about financial stuff. The name and phone number of your lawyer, what military benefits you're entitled to, who you owe money to and what the password is to your computer. For almost everything in it, it has a blank line where you write down the location where someone can find the documentation about that item. It's not perfect by any means. But it's a really good start for all of us, at any age.

Other people can handle the casseroles and the lawn and the kids, at least for a while. But no one can tell your family where you filed a copy of your health care proxy. Plus in it, there are a few questions about what you see as your real legacy to your family, what lessons you hope they take from your life.

I've committed to my family that I'll fill out my love letter to them, although I know there are places where I'll have to say that I haven't done something yet. But even that will keep them from spending hours looking for something doesn't exist. My parents and my sister have committed to do the same. And we've all promised to put hard copies of our love letters in clearly marked folders right at the front of our files.

I've brought a few hard copies with me today. We've posted an electronic copy on our website, www.bccnh.org. I urge you to write your love letter to your family. When we are in the heart of heartache, we need to feel the love that surrounds us. When our families are in the middle of their cataclysm, every struggle we can spare them is a love letter sent over time. For the families that we love, here is one way to make sure our love continues forward to them, when they most need it. After all, God has been writing love letters to Creation since God brought Creation into being.