

“Time to Deliver”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
5th Sunday after Pentecost – 20 June 2010
I Kings 19:1-15a; Luke 8:26-39

Have you noting the rising fascination with the supernatural? Books about vampires and magic, angels and demons, fly off the shelves. Movies on any of those topics tend to draw enormous crowds. The famous Harry Potter series sold millions of copies and tickets and DVD’s. The adventures written by Dan Brown and Michael Scott and many others, who hint of long-held secrets and unimaginable mysteries, also do well. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not criticizing. I enjoy that stuff immensely.

We might be tempted to assume that these popular fantasies reveal nothing more than a desire for escape, and in part, that may be true. But there’s more to it than just that. Whether it’s a young wizard able to perform wonders with a flick of the wrist and a mumbled phrase, or some super-sleuth caught in the middle of a terrible conspiracy, these stories feed a hunger: a hunger to discover something amazing; a hunger to be transformed; a hunger to be initiated and to belong to a group that is somehow special.

Of course, we know a story that meets the deepest needs people feel, and it’s not for sale in fiction section. When it comes to adventure, it doesn’t get much better than Elijah fleeing for his life from a Jezebel’s vendetta. The prophet ran into the wilderness, filled with fear, overcome by despair to the point where he just wanted to die, but God did not abandon him. Angels came to provide nourishment and encouragement, and when Elijah sought refuge in a cave in a cliff, God came to him. The wind and the flame and an earthquake heralded God’s arrival, but once God showed up on the scene there was an indescribable silence, a symbol of the peace a person feels in the presence of God.

Now you might say, “Well, I’m no Elijah,” and you would be right. Few if any of us ever manage to bring down the wrath of someone like Jezebel on our heads, and we rarely if ever encounter elemental forces unleashed with such fury, like what preceded God’s presence in the days of Elijah. But the peace part, we can connect with that. Most if not all of us here have felt that beautiful calm descend upon our pain, our fear, our misery. We yearn for it, and the mere memory of that blessing of peace causes gratitude to blossom in our hearts. There’s nothing more amazing than the peace of God’s presence; nothing that transforms us so completely and gracefully; nothing else that empowers us to rise above and go beyond. When we belong to God, we feel very special, because God is very special. It doesn’t get much better than that. Or does it?

Finally off the lake after the storm, the disciples of Jesus must have felt relieved, until they encountered a naked man, blooded and bruised and filthy; a man who, to phrase it in that quaint Southern way, obviously wasn’t quite right. He was infested with demons, and Jesus set him free. We can hardly imagine the sweet release he felt, though there have been times when we felt like a stranger in our own skin, trapped and overwhelmed by forces beyond our control, forces that caused us to do hurtful things to ourselves and to others. To hear the voice of Jesus in the midst of that chaos, stilling the storm of our soul, what a mercy!

And yet for many, the healing power of Jesus and the peace of God’s presence aren’t on the bestseller list, not even on the shelf. There’s no interest, and we wonder why, especially among the younger generations, where the hunger for the supernatural seems the greatest.

We can list many probable causes: young adults wounded by a childhood experience of religious repression or bored into a spiritual coma by a faith that was all show and no go; suspicion of communities, like the Church, which by necessity have an institutional structure.

We can also assure ourselves that someday, when those teens and twenty-something's "grow up" and get married and have children, that they'll come rushing back. But we might be missing part of the picture here, because so far, the focus has been mostly on them; on us, not so much. But we're the messengers, right? We're the bearers of the story, endowed with spiritual gifts to not only bear but also to share the story, through word and deed.

Maybe we're missing something in translation: time for us to learn a new language, a fresh way to deliver ancient truths; time to decipher the code of our faith. Maybe we've become so concerned with how we do things that we've lost sight of what we're meant to do. Maybe we're just downright scared, not so much of failure, which is humiliating, but of success, because to succeed with the Gospel means more than changing another person's life. The message changes the life of both the recipient and the giver, often in ways we don't expect or find totally satisfying. If we practice evangelism, we may walk into worship one day and find a stranger sitting in OUR seat.

But we have a story to tell, a story of blood that has been shed and offered and consumed, not in the death-dealing way of vampires, but through the life-giving sacrament that offers eternity, instead of a pale immortality lurking in the shadows. Through the Spirit, we can invite people into mysteries open to anyone seeking them, not just the brilliant few who stumble into amazing discoveries.

Where's our sense of urgency around telling that story? Do we lack the imagination to tell it like it is? Are we ashamed, too selfish, or simply frightened? Have we become complacent, adopting the attitude of, "Here we are, y'all come?"

Jesus expects more of us. He wants us to share his story, a true story that both fulfills the deepest desires and needs of the human heart, a story that brings transformation and a sense of belonging.

It's up to us, and no excuse will suffice if we refuse by our inaction to set people free from the demons that control them. Being a disciple is a great privilege that brings with it great responsibility to find people dying of thirst in the desert, and bring them the water of life, which is nothing less than the peace of God's presence. Being filled with the compassion of Jesus compels us to find a way for people of all ages and backgrounds to look and listen and like what they see and hear so much that they are pulled in. Such work is not only what we do, it defines who we are. If our purpose isn't to tell the story, then what is?

It's time for us to get out there and compete, and make the Gospel at least as fascinating as the latest best seller that will be forgotten in a few years, selling for pennies on the dollar in a used book store. Go forth with God, and deliver. Deliver the good news. Deliver people from their distress, from their numbness. As it did with those who went before us, the world depends upon the choice we make each day. Amen.