

***THE FEAST OF ELIJAH***  
***The Role of Prophets***  
***What Is Prophecy?***  
***THE GERGESENE DEMONIACS AND COVETOUSNESS***

**July 20, 2008**  
**Revision B**

**GOSPEL: Matthew 8:28-9:1**  
**EPISTLE: James 5:10-20**

Today's Gospel lesson, recorded only by Luke, is sometimes used in the West for the 4th Sunday after Epiphany. Today's Epistle lesson is not used in the Western lectionaries.

**The Importance of the Prophets**

Most people are aware of the role of the Twelve Apostles in establishing the Church. The Lord had said to Peter, "On this rock I will build My Church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18f). Less noticed, however, is the role of the prophets. Paul said, "You are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles **and prophets**, Jesus Christ being the Chief Cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:19-20). Peter said, "I now write you this second epistle that you may be mindful of the words **which were spoken before by the holy prophets**, and of the commandments of us, the Apostles of the Lord and Savior" (2 Peter 3:1-2). From these statements, the importance of the prophets would seem to rival that of the Twelve Apostles to the Church.

Elijah is often seen as representing the prophets much as Peter is seen as representing the Twelve Apostles. At the Transfiguration, it was Moses (representing the Law) and Elijah (representing the prophets) that appeared in glory with the Lord (Luke 9:30-31). The Lord had referred to John the Baptist as the greatest of the prophets (Luke 7:28); but Elijah had a special distinction in that he was translated to heaven without seeing death (2 Kings 2:11-12).

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## *The Role of Prophets*

July 20, 2008  
Revision B

**GOSPEL: Luke 4:22-26, 28-30**

### **MAJOR EVENTS IN ELIJAH'S LIFE**

#### **Withholding Rain**

Elijah was a descendant of the settlers of Gilead (1 Kings 17:1) who moved in during the time of the Judges (Judges 12:4-7). The first mention of him occurred during the reign of King Ahab following Ahab's marriage to Jezebel and the subsequent building of altars and a Temple to Baal, and building the Asherah on the high places. Elijah said to King Ahab that there would be neither dew nor rain for several years until he (Elijah) said so. Then Elijah left for the East side of the Jordan (1 Kings 17:1-3).

Elijah lived there for a while and was fed by ravens sent by the Lord, who brought him bread and meat in the morning and in the evening. His source of water was the brook Cherith (1 Kings 17:4-6). When the brook dried up from the lack of rain, the Lord told him to go to the town of Zarephath in Sidon on the Mediterranean coast. Sidon was the birthplace of Jezebel (1 Kings 16:31).

On entering the gate of Zarephath, he called to a widow who was gathering sticks, asking for a drink of water. As she was going to get the water, he asked her also for a piece of bread. She replied that she had no bread. All she had was a handful of flour and a little oil. She was going to prepare a last meal for her son and herself, expecting that they would starve to death afterward because of the famine and drought (1 Kings 17:9-12).

Elijah then asked her to prepare some food for him also. "For thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain on the face of the earth' " (1 Kings 17:11-14). She did as Elijah asked and her bowl of flour lasted for several years until the famine was over. During that time, Elijah stayed in the upper room of her house (1 Kings 17:15-16).

During the time Elijah stayed there, the woman's young son died. Elijah carried the child to the upper room and laid him on his own bed. Then he raised him from the dead (1 Kings 17:24). From tradition, the child was later known as the Prophet Jonah who prefigured Christ by spending three days in the belly of the sea monster (Prologue, September 22; Jonah 1:17).

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## Contesting with the Prophets of Baal

Just before the end of the drought and famine, the Lord told Elijah to meet with King Ahab. Elijah arranged a face-to-face meeting between himself and 450 prophets of Baal along with 400 prophets of the Asherah who ate at Jezebel's table (1 Kings 18:18-19). At this meeting he chastised the people for forsaking the Lord and proposed a test: The prophets of Baal and he would each be given an ox to sacrifice and would prepare the sacrifice according to their traditions; but each would put no fire to the wood under the sacrifice. The god (Baal vs. the Lord) who answers by fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice is the real God. The response of the people was "that is a good idea" (1 Kings 18:21-24).

The prophets of Baal prepared their sacrifice first and called on the name of Baal all day. They also leaped about their altar, cutting themselves with swords and lances "until the blood gushed out of them." "But there was no voice, no one answered and no one paid attention" (1 Kings 18:25-29). One might compare this behavior with that of the Gadarene demoniacs (Mark 5:5).

At the time of the evening sacrifice (according to Mosaic Law), Elijah repaired the altar of the Lord which had been torn down. He also dug a trench around the altar capable of holding 2 seahs of seed (about 14 quarts); this would make the trench about 18 inches deep. Then he put the sacrifice and the wood on the altar. Before offering the evening prayers according to Mosaic Law, Elijah commanded that four pitchers of water be poured on the sacrifice and the wood. This he did three times. These pitchers were what women used to draw water from a well and held 3-4 gallons. Thus the water flowed around the altar and also filled the trench with water (1 Kings 18:30-35). The amount of liquid involved is consistent with a trench about 12 feet in diameter.

Then Elijah called on the Lord, " 'Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that Thou art God and that Thou hast turned their heart back again'. Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dirt, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, 'The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God!!' " (1 Kings 18:36-39).

With the hearts of the people turned back to the Lord, the first thing Elijah told them to do was kill the 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:40) which was the prescribed punishment in the Mosaic Law for someone who was a false prophet (Deuteronomy 18:20-22) or who advocated idolatry (Deuteronomy 13:1-4). Following the confrontation, Elijah brought back the rain that had been withheld for over three years (Luke 4:25). The Lord had promised a bounty for His people if they obeyed all His commandments; this was a small beginning of the Lord opening His good storehouse (Deuteronomy 28:12ff).

## Hearing the Lord's Voice

When King Ahab told Queen Jezebel all that Elijah had done, she vowed to kill him. Elijah fled for his life into the wilderness (1 Kings 19:1-3). There he was fed by angels and traveled in the strength of that angelic-supplied food for forty days in an effort to seek the Lord's voice regarding what he should do next. Finally, he arrived at Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God, and lodged in a cave there (1 Kings 19:4-9). Mt. Horeb is the mountain range of which Mt. Sinai (the place of the giving of the Mosaic Law) is one of the peaks.

While there, the Lord told Elijah to stand on the mountain before the Lord as the Lord passed by. "And a great and strong wind was tearing the mountains apart and breaking in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, a sound or voice, (literally) *a small whisper*" (1 Kings 19:11-13). It was in this small whisper that Elijah heard the Lord's voice and got an answer as to what he should do.

First, the Lord told him to anoint Hazael as king of Aram (a neighboring country) in place of Ben-hadad. Next he was to anoint Jehu as king of Israel in place of Ahab. Then he was to anoint Elisha as prophet in place of himself (1 Kings 19:15-17).

This took a few years to take place. Ben-hadad, along with 32 other kings, marched into Israel and besieged Samaria with an enormous army. Yet he was defeated by an army of less than 7,000 under King Ahab who was acting at the direction of one of the prophets (1 Kings 20).

After this, Queen Jezebel used deceit and false witnesses to have Naboth killed so she could give Naboth's vineyard to her husband. As Ahab went to take possession of the vineyard, the Lord told Elijah to meet him there and confronted him for his part in Jezebel's sin. When Ahab heard Elijah's words, he repented and began fasting in sackcloth for a long time. When the Lord saw this, He postponed the destruction of the house of Ahab for one generation (1 Kings 21).

About three years later (1 Kings 22:1), Ahab died from wounds he received in battle just as the word of the Lord had spoken through Elijah (1 Kings 21:19, 22:38). Ahab's son Ahaziah became king in his place. Shortly after being crowned king, Ahaziah had an accident and was badly injured. So he sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, as to whether he would recover. The angel of the Lord told Elijah to meet the messengers on the way, saying, "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub?" Then he told them: thus says the Lord: Ahaziah will not recover; and he sent them back to Ahaziah (2 Kings 1:1-4).

Ahaziah was furious and sent a captain with 50 soldiers to bring Elijah by force to his palace in Samaria. They found Elijah sitting on top of a hill and ordered him, "O man of God, the king says, 'come here!'" Elijah replied, "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty". And thus it happened (2 Kings 1:9-10).

Ahaziah sent another captain with fifty more soldiers; the same thing happened. So he sent a third captain and fifty more. But this time the captain fell on his face before Elijah and pleaded for his life. Then the angel of the Lord told Elijah to go with the captain. Elijah went to Ahaziah's palace and told him in person the same thing he told the messengers: that Ahaziah would not recover. Ahaziah died shortly afterward (2 Kings 1:11-17).

### **Elijah's Translation**

When the time of Elijah's departure drew near, all the prophets in the area knew it was going to happen. For example, when Elijah and Elisha traveled from Gilgal to Bethel, the sons of the prophets of Bethel asked Elisha if he knew "that the Lord will take away your master from over your head today?" Elisha knew that also. Then when they traveled to Jericho, the sons of the prophets asked Elisha the same thing (2 Kings 2:2-5).

The place for Elijah's translation was on the opposite side of the Jordan near where Moses had been buried. Moses was buried in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor (Deuteronomy 33:6). This is across the Jordan from Jericho.

As Elijah and Elisha headed for the spot, fifty of the sons of the prophets followed them to the bank of the Jordan. When they reached the river, Elijah took off his mantle (coarse outer garment) and struck the water. The Jordan river was divided so that they crossed on dry ground (2 Kings 2:6-8).

When they reached the spot, Elijah asked Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you." Elisha replied, "Please, let a double portion of your Spirit be upon me" (2 Kings 2:9). Elijah replied, "If you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you" (2 Kings 2:10).

As they were going along and talking, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven (2 Kings 2:11). Elisha cried out, "My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen" (2 Kings 2:12). Then he saw Elijah no more.

Elisha then tore his clothes in two pieces, which was a sign of grief (compare Joel 2:13), and picked up Elijah's mantle which had fallen as he left in the chariot of fire. Heading back to the Jordan, Elisha struck the water again with the mantle and the waters parted for him to walk back across (2 Kings 2:12-14).

This event was evidently witnessed by more than just the fifty sons of the prophets on the West Bank of the Jordan. As Elisha was about to leave Jericho for Bethel, he was mocked by at least 42 children who kept saying, "Go up baldy; go up baldy!" (2 Kings 2:23). Thus the translation of Elijah was a well-known event in that locale.

This is not the last we hear of Elijah in the Scripture. Almost 900 years later, the same Elijah appeared transfigured with Jesus and Moses to Peter, James and John on the mountain (Matthew 17:3-4). In this case Moses represented the Law and Elijah represented the prophets as a testimony of their witness concerning Jesus. Moses and Elijah also spoke with Jesus of His departure (i.e. His death) which He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem (Luke 9:30-31). How

did this happen? The Lord called it a “vision”; it was probably similar to other visions that others of the prophets had. For example, compare Ezekiel (Ezekiel 43:3; Ezekiel 1-5), the Apostle Paul (Acts 9:11-12), the Apostle Peter (Acts 11:5-10), and the Apostle John (Revelation 9:17).

This may not be the last time we hear from Elijah either. It was the understanding of the early Church that the two witnesses referred to in the Apostle John’s vision would be Elijah and Enoch (Revelation 11:3-12). In this case, Enoch represents the prophets prior to the Flood (Jude 1:14-15), and both Enoch (Genesis 5:22-24, Hebrews 11:5) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) were taken to heaven without tasting death.

## **THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS**

The Old Testament is customarily divided into three sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the Holy Writings. “The Law” is the five books of Moses. “The Prophets” are divided into the Major Prophets and the Twelve Minor Prophets beginning with Hosea. The “Holy Writings” are such books as Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, etc.

Taken together, the Law and the Prophets represents everything man needs to know to be saved. The Lord stated that He did not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them. Not one stroke will pass from the Law until this happens (Matthew 5:17-18). And all of the Law and the Prophets won’t be fulfilled until the Lord returns in Glory (Luke 24:44). The core of the Law and the Prophets is the Greatest Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-40, Matthew 7:12), where this Greatest Commandment is part of the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18).

Up until the time of John the Baptist, all that anyone had was the Law and the Prophets (Luke 16:16). To this effect, there were readings from the Law and the Prophets every Sabbath in the Synagogues (Acts 13:15, Luke 4:16, 2 Corinthians 3:15). In the Story of Lazarus and the rich man, all that the rich man’s brothers needed was the Law and the Prophets (Luke 16:29-31).

Because the rulers and the people in Jerusalem did not know or understand the Law and the Prophets, they ended up fulfilling them by condemning Jesus (Acts 13:27). The Twelve Apostles recognized the Lord as being the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets (John 1:45). But even they were slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had spoken (Luke 24:25).

One of Paul’s strengths was that he did believe all things which are written in the Law and the Prophets (Acts 24:14). Paul’s Gospel message involved “saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come” (Acts 26:22). He “explained and solemnly testified of the Kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets” (Acts 28:23). He even taught that “the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets” (Romans 3:21).

One might ask how the righteousness of God can be revealed by the Law apart from the law. Very simple. One needs to go back to the core meaning of the Law: the Greatest Commandment. Loving the Lord God with all our heart, soul and mind is definitely an effort of

the heart and not of a rule book. For more details on the Greatest Commandment, see the Gospel lesson for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost.

### **The Foundation of the Church**

The Prophets also have had a hand in revealing some of the mysteries of God. Paul was “called to be an Apostle, separated to the Gospel of God, which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures” (Romans 1:2). Peter said this also. As Peter was addressing Cornelius and the Gentiles, he said, “To Him, all the prophets witness that, through His Name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43). As Peter said this, the Holy Spirit came on the Gentiles as He did on the other disciples at Pentecost. “For the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations the mystery kept secret since the world began” (Romans 16:26; see also Ephesians 1:9-10; Colossians 1:26-27, 2:2-3; 2 Timothy 1:9-10).

Paul stated that the Church, the household of God, “was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the Chief Cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20). Paul went on to say that “the Lord made known to him the mystery which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 3:3-5). Peter witnesses to this also stating that his readers should “be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandments of us, the Apostles of the Lord and Savior” (2 Peter 3:2).

This mystery is Christ in us (Jew and Gentile), the hope of glory and had been hidden from ages and from generations (Colossians 1:26-27). This mystery involves gathering together in one, all things in Christ, which means the Church (Ephesians 1:9). This mystery had been kept secret since the world began (Romans 16:25), and had the rulers of this age known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory (1 Corinthians 2:7-8). This mystery will finally be finished at the end of time when the Lord returns; and it is the prophets who have given us glimpses of it (Revelation 10:7).

## *What Is Prophecy?*

**July 20, 2008**  
**Revision B**

**EPISTLE: James 5:10-20**

### **WHAT IS PROPHECY?**

Prophecy is usually defined as the foretelling of future events. However, there is a lot more to it than a simple foretelling. Paul alludes to the gift of prophecy in its fullest as including the understanding of all mysteries and all knowledge (1 Corinthians 13:2). For example, the Old Testament prophets are described by Peter as inquiring and searching carefully into the salvation of our souls, and prophesying of the Grace that would come to us (1 Peter 1:10).

Prophets in the First Century were expected to have an extra ordinary perception. For example, when Jesus was invited to dinner at Simon the Pharisee's house, a sinful woman began washing His feet with her tears, wiping His feet with her hair and anointing His feet with fragrant oil. Simon thought to himself: "This Man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him" (Luke 7:39). Prophets were expected to have this kind of understanding and perception. The prophets in Corinth were expected by Paul to have the ability to reveal the secrets of men's hearts such that an unbeliever would fall on his face and report that God was truly among them (1 Corinthians 14:24-25).

A more general use of the gift of prophecy was the edification, exhortation and comfort to those in the Church (1 Corinthians 14:3-4). But most prophecy is limited; one prophesies only in part (1 Corinthians 13:8-9) since God does not usually reveal too much all at once (John 16:12, Mark 4:33). We can only prophesy according to the faith that we have (Romans 12:6).

The most general definition of prophecy is simply, "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Revelation 19:10). In this regard, Peter spoke of the words of God the Father on the Mountain of Transfiguration, "This is My Beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased," as being a "prophetic word confirmed" (2 Peter 1:19). Peter went on to say that "no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20, 21). Thus prophecy in the Church was expected to be judged by the Church (1 Corinthians 14:29).

Perhaps some of the most unusual prophecy in the Old Testament was done with musical instruments. Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun, called "the king's seers" (2 Chronicles 29:30, 1 Chronicles 25:5, 2 Chronicles 35:15), were set apart by King David to prophesy with lyres, harps and cymbals, performing as skillful musicians in the Temple liturgy (1 Chronicles 25:1-6). This was such an important part of the Temple liturgy that the same "instruments of David" were



dusted off and brought back to active use during the reforms of Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 29:25-28). This instrumental prophecy was still “the testimony of Jesus” since all aspects of the Temple liturgy and sacrifice pointed to Jesus in some prophetic way.

## **Prophecy in the Church**

The Lord had said “Many prophets and kings have desired to see what you see, and have not seen it, and to hear what you hear, and have not heard it” (Luke 10:24). The context there was the return of the Seventy from being sent out two-by-two to heal the sick and cast out demons.

But one might say that the Old Testament prophets heard the Lord’s voice, performed miracles and even raised the dead. What didn’t they see that the Lord’s disciples did? Cyril of Alexandria and John Chrysostom both say that what the prophets didn’t see was God incarnate. They knew the things to come and also greatly desired them. But they didn’t have the opportunity to see for themselves (Commentary of Luke, chapter 10; Homily xlv on Matthew 13).

Some examples of prophets in the church are Agabus (Acts 11:28, 21:10), Joseph called Barsabas and Silas (Acts 15:22, 32; 1:23), Anna (Luke 2:36), and Deacon Philip’s four virgin daughters (Acts 21:8-9). It was the prophets and teachers in Antioch that sent Paul and Barnabas out on their First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:1-3). Timothy, as Bishop of Ephesus, was encouraged by Paul “Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the presbyters” (1 Timothy 4:14).

After healing the lame man on Solomon’s Porch (Acts 3:11), people crowded around Peter. Peter told them that they had denied the Holy One and asked for a murderer (Barnabas) instead, killing the Prince of Life. Yet God raised Him from the dead (Acts 3:13-16). These things had been foretold by the prophets, that the Christ would suffer and that heaven must receive Him until the restoration of all things (Acts 3:18, 21). Yet, Peter said, you are the sons of the prophets and of the Covenant that God made with our fathers and to you first God sent His Servant Jesus to bless you (Acts 3:25-26). Five thousand more men believed because of Peter’s words (Acts 4:4). Thus began a work in the Church which “the despisers will by no means believe” (Acts 13:40).

## **Persecution Follows the Prophets**

Today’s Epistle lesson begins with James, the Lord’s brother, using the prophets who spoke in the Name of the Lord as an example of suffering and patience. This was certainly true for Elijah:

- Withstanding the drought and famine
- Birds bringing his only food
- Standing alone against the king and the prophets of Baal
- Living in a cave on Mt. Sinai
- At risk daily of Jezebel’s wrath

As we speak in the Name of the Lord, we can expect some kind of persecution also.

The Lord had said, “Blessed are you when men hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and cast out your name as evil for the Son of Man’s sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets.” On the other hand, “Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets” (Luke 6:22, 23, 26; Matthew 5:10-12).

In this regard, the Lord also said, “He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward” (Matthew 10:41). This can be difficult at times, as the Lord pointed out in our Gospel lesson: “Assuredly I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country” (Luke 4:24; also Matthew 13:57, John 4:44). Mark added to this that a prophet is without honor in his own country, among his own relatives and in his own house (Mark 6:4).

### **Beware of False Prophets**

Paul counseled the Thessalonians “Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21). If prophecy is the Lord speaking to His people, it is important that one not despise this. However, the Lord had also warned His followers: “Beware of false prophets who come in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” Of these, He said, “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord have we not prophesied in Your Name and done many wonders in Your Name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’ “ (Matthew 7:15, 22, 23; see also Matthew 24:11, 24; Mark 13:22). In this regard, we have only to remember Judas Iscariot who performed many wonders in the Lord’s Name when the Lord sent the Twelve out two-by-two (Matthew 10:1-8). Yet he was a thief (John 12:6) and sold the King of Kings for thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26:14-15).

The Apostle John also warned the Church to beware of false prophets: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God. Because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). One specific spirit he warned about was the prophetess Jezebel in Thyatira (Revelation 2:20).

The Apostle Peter said the same thing: “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction” (2 Peter 2:1). He went on to compare these false prophets to the fallen angels, to brutish animals and to the (false) Prophet Balaam (2 Peter 2:4-18; see also Numbers 22, 23, 24).

### **We Can All Prophesy**

Jeremiah prophesied that the Lord would make a New Covenant with the House of Israel where He would put His Law within them and write it on their hearts. He would be their God and they would be His people. They would not need to teach each man his neighbor and each man his brother saying, “Know the Lord”, for they would all know Him from the least of them to the greatest of them (Jeremiah 31:31-34). This prophecy is quoted verbatim in Hebrews to explain what the Lord had done by the Cross and by the giving of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 8:7-13).

When the Lord put His Spirit on Moses' Seventy Elders, Moses remarked, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets" (Numbers 11:29). Paul stated that this is now not only possible but he even recommends it: "For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged" (1 Corinthians 14:31). However, Paul cautions to be sure that "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (1 Corinthians 14:32). John Chrysostom stated that this refers to the judgment or discernment of the other prophets (v.29) to be sure no diviner or false prophet comes into their midst (Homily xxxvi on 1 Corinthians 14).

What this means on a practical day-to-day level is that every one of the Lord's people needs an intimate experience with God. In Elijah's case there were some great catastrophic events taking place: a great wind, an earthquake, a fire. But the Lord wasn't there. He heard the Lord's voice in a gentle whisper. Similarly, we can hear the Lord's voice in the quietness of our heart.

Sometimes we find ourselves in the midst of a great deal of satanic influence, similar to Elijah confronting the Prophets of Baal and withholding rain for three and a half years. By proclaiming the Word of God, we often do this also, even if not as dramatically. We can persevere in this for a time and we need to confront Satanic influence. But there often comes a time when we're not sure what to do next. Like Elijah, we need to go somewhere where we can hear the Lord's voice just as Elijah went to Mt. Sinai, the Mountain of God.

But just hearing the Lord's voice is not enough. Balaam heard the Lord's voice repeatedly (Numbers 22:9-12, 20, 31-35; 23:4,5, 16; 24:2-9, 15-19). So did Judas Iscariot. We also need to do what we say and obey the Lord's voice with all our heart. We need to avoid what was prophesied by Isaiah: "This people drew near with their mouth and honored Me with their lips; but they remove their hearts far from Me. And their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote" (Isaiah 29:13).

As we hear the Lord's voice we will have opportunities to intercede for others. From today's Gospel text, Elijah was sent to the widow of Zarephath specifically and not to the many widows in Israel (Luke 4:25-26). Elijah interceded for her regarding raising her son from the dead (1 Kings 17:17-23). In the Orthodox liturgy we intercede for others many times, and we are encouraged to do so privately also.

James addresses this intercession in today's Epistle lesson: "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the presbyters of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Name of the Lord. And the vow of the Faith will save the sick. And the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (James 5:13-15). Contained within these verses from James are three prophetic roles:

- First is suffering. In verse 10, James uses the prophets as an example of suffering and patience. "Indeed we count them blessed who endure." James then mentioned the perseverance of Job and added that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful (v.11). Abraham also patiently endured to obtain the promise (Hebrews 6:15). Whether we are called on to suffer or whether we intercede in prayer with someone else who is suffering, it is a prophetic calling, because it is the testimony of Jesus.

- Singing joyfully to the Lord is also a prophetic calling as was demonstrated by Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun in the Temple worship. The Book of Psalms has been called the songbook of the Church, and is the legacy left to us of the prophecy and “testimony of Jesus” experienced by David and others as they developed the Old Testament Liturgy.
- The third aspect mentioned by James is anointing the sick with oil in the Name of the Lord to heal them. This is the method the Lord taught the Twelve to use when He sent them out two-by-two to heal the sick, cast out demons and raise the dead (Mark 6:13). Compare also Matthew 10:5-23, Luke 9:1-10 regarding the Twelve and Luke 10:1-20 regarding the Seventy. The Orthodox Church today has a special service where holy oil is applied by the presbyters for the healing of the sick. This is a prophetic work also and all can participate: Not just by coming in faith to be healed, but also by being part of the blessing in the service. For the Lord had said, “He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward” (Matthew 10:41). We do this as we accept, in faith, the “testimony of Jesus” being spoken by the presbyter.

# ***THE GERGESENE DEMONIACS AND COVETOUSNESS***

**July 20, 2008**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Revision B**

## **GOSPEL: Matthew 8:28-9:1**

Today's Gospel lesson, either from Matthew 8, Mark 5 or Luke 8 is not used at all in the Western lectionaries. In the Eastern lectionary, this lesson is used twice: in October from Luke 8 and today from Matthew 8. From Luke 8 (or the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Luke in October), the theme is taken from the text which relates mental illness in terms of demon possession. For today's Gospel lesson from Matthew 8, the theme follows John Chrysostom's lead in comparing demon possession to covetousness.

Today's Epistle lesson is used in part in the West. Verses 8-13 are sometimes used for the first Sunday in Lent while verses 4-18 are sometimes used for the 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity.

## **GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 8:24-9:1 – Covetousness**

The Gospel account took place in the winter of 28 AD and is also described in Mark 5:1-20 and Luke 8:26-39. (Jesus was crucified in the Spring of 30 AD). Jesus and His disciples had just finished rowing across the Sea of Galilee to the Eastern shore, probably in one of the fishing boats. On the way, a storm arose and Jesus calmed the storm. The Twelve were stunned, "Who can this be, that even the winds and the water obey him?" (Luke 8:25, Matthew 8:27, Mark 4:41). Following the calming of the storm, today's Gospel lesson took place. When they got back to Nazareth after this trip, Jesus sent the Twelve out two by two to heal the sick, raise the dead and cast out demons all by themselves (Luke 9:1-6, Matthew 10:5-23, Mark 6:7-13). The Gospel lesson, then, is a hands-on-how-to-do-it in preparation for the sending forth of the Twelve. Jesus knew He was going to do this and picked a real bearcat as a demonstration.

As soon as they stepped out of the boat in the country of the Gergesenes (or Gadaranes in Matthew 8:28; Gadara and Gergesa were not too far apart), they were met by demon possessed men. Some details about these men:

- There were actually two of them (Matthew 8:28)
- They were naked and lived in the tombs (Luke 8:27)
- They had been like this for a long time (Luke 8:27)
- These men had been locked up, bound with chains and shackles, but they broke the chains (Luke 8:27)
- They were exceedingly fierce; no one could pass that way (Matthew 8:28)

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- Night and day these men would cry out and cut themselves with stones (Mark 5:5. Compare 1 Kings 18:28)

In today's terminology, they would be classified as a danger to themselves and others (that is, seriously mentally ill). Treatment programs today involve major tranquilizers to sedate them followed by more tranquilizers to stabilize them and control their erratic behavior.

When Jesus commanded the demons to come out of the men, the demons begged Jesus not to torment them before the time (Matthew 8:29). This is an interesting request! Night and day, the demons had caused the two men to cry out in pain and cut themselves with stones (Mark 5:5). But yet now the demons don't want Jesus to hurt them? Jesus then asked the men their name, and the demons replied, "My name is Legion, for we are many!" (Mark 5:9). A legion represented 2000 to 6000 foot soldiers and included some cavalry. The demons then begged Jesus that He allow them to enter a herd of swine (about 2000 according to Mark 5:13) that were feeding a good way off from them (Matthew 8:30). Jesus permitted them to do so and suddenly the whole herd ran violently down the steep embankment into the lake and drowned.

The reaction to all this by the herdsmen and the townsfolk is almost as strange as the demoniacs' behavior. When the herdsmen brought the townsfolk out and they saw the former demoniacs clothed, in their right mind, and sitting at Jesus' feet, they were afraid. When the herdsmen explained all that had happened, the townsfolk were seized with great fear and asked Jesus to leave. The demoniacs weren't the only ones in the area that had problems.

Two thousand head of swine represents a major industry for that area. While the Eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee was a largely Gentile population, meat from the swine was not lawful to be eaten by Jews (Leviticus 11:7). To eat it anyway was a sacrilege and punished by the person being cut off from Israel (Leviticus 7:20-21). If the townsfolk were intent on butchering the 2000 swine that just died in order to recoup some of their loss, they certainly wouldn't want some Jews around to watch. These swine would be doubly unclean, since they died of themselves (Deuteronomy 14:21). So who were the swine being raised for? From the reaction of the townsfolk (that the swine-raising industry supported) to a group of Jews (Jesus and the Twelve), the implication is that some of the meat was sold to Jews and that greed or covetousness was present. And it is from this aspect of the Gospel lesson that John Chrysostom had much to say.

A definition of covetousness here is needed. It is more than merely a desire to improve one's lot in life. Instead it involves discontent and unhappiness with one's current possessions and, with priorities completely out of line, a single minded path toward acquisition of material priorities. This is best illustrated with some examples.

John Chrysostom (4<sup>th</sup> Century) makes an analogy between the demoniacs and various people of his day. "From history, we are able to know that the swinish sort of men are especially liable to the operations of the demons. As long as they remain men and suffer such things, they are often able yet to prevail; but if they are become altogether swine, they are not only possessed, but are also cast down the precipice."

Chrysostom continues, "And what of the covetous man (i.e. in the Church)? Is he not like this? For who will ever be able to bind him? Are there not fears and daily threats, and

admonitions and counsels, i.e. from the Liturgy, Matins, Gospel and Epistle readings, etc.? All these bonds he bursts asunder. And if anyone should come to set him free, he adjures him that he does not want to be freed, accounting it the greatest torture to be “freed.” What can be more wretched? The evil spirits, even though they despised men, yet they yielded to the command of Christ and quickly sprang out of the man’s body. But the covetous man yields not even to His commandment. He daily hears Him saying, ‘You cannot serve God and mammon’ (Matthew 6:24), and threatening hell and endless torments but obeys not. Not that he is stronger than Christ, but because against our will Christ corrects us not” (Homily xxviii on Matthew 8). In regard to this, Jesus did not try to correct the townsfolk; he left the former demoniacs to do that.

While the demoniacs were so fierce that “no one could pass that way” (Matthew 8:28), Chrysostom continues, “yet is the covetous man much more fierce even than this, assailing all like hell, swallowing all up, going about as a common enemy to the race of men. He longs also to mar the substance of the earth and to see it all become gold; nay, not the earth only, but hills also, and woods and fountains and in word all things that appear.”

“Many at least with this view have even paid money to be childless, and having maimed their nature, not only by slaying their children after birth, but by not suffering them even to be born at all” (that is abortion).

“How then shall we deliver the covetous man from the demon? He often undergoes great losses in his attempts to gain money. Wishing to lend at high interest, he often doesn’t check those receiving the money – and loses everything. Others falling into danger, cling to their money and lose their life with their substance by delaying their escape.”

“Covetous men do not know how to sow but always practice reaping, and continually fail in their harvest (Galatians 6:7, 2 Corinthians 9:6, Proverbs 11:8). For no man can be always reaping; neither can he be always gaining. Therefore, being unwilling to spend, neither do they know how to gain. Should they take a wife, the same thing befalls them. For either they are deceived (by avarice) into taking a poor wife instead of a rich one; or when they have brought home one that is rich, they find her full of faults without number and incur more loss than gain. What profit is there of her wealth when she is expensive, debauched and scatters all abroad more vehemently than any wind? But they do not only marry, but also buy at great risk, from their great covetousness, laboring to find not good workers, but cheap ones” (Luke 10:7, 1 Timothy 5:18).

The writer of Hebrews had said, “Let your conduct be without the love of money; be content with such things as you have. For He himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Hebrews 13:5). This promise was made to the people of God as they began the very difficult task of the conquest of Canaan (Deuteronomy 31:6-8, Joshua 1:5).

On the other hand, our American culture bombards us with a constant urging of consumerism and keeping up with the Joneses. Advertising tells us that we need the latest model car or TV or computer or fashions. The Lord had warned, however, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for your life does not consist in the abundance of the things you possess” (Luke 12:15).

Paul addressed this at length in his first epistle to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:6-10):

- Godliness with contentment is great gain (v.6)
- We brought nothing in and carry nothing out of this world (v.7, Psalm 49:17, Ecc. 5:14, Job 1:21).
- Be content with food and clothing (v.8, Matthew 6:25-32)
- The covetous fall into a snare, into harmful lusts which cause men to sink into ruin and perdition (v.9, Proverbs 30:8-9)
- The love of money is a root of all evil (v.10)
- In pursuing this, some have wandered away from the Faith and pierced themselves with many griefs (v.10).

We tend to belittle covetousness since it is such a major part of our American consumer-oriented economy. Thus, it is a major challenge to follow Paul's admonition: "Let (covetousness) not even be named among you" (Ephesians 5:3). We tend to overlook places in the Scripture that list covetousness among the worst and most debauched characteristics among men (Mark 7:22, Romans 1:29, Ephesians 4:19, 2 Peter 2:1-19) that those who hate God are given over to. Thus, covetousness can become a demonic-like possession for those who refuse to humble their hearts and be content with the Lord's provision. And we, like the townsfolk may end up sending the Son of God away for interrupting our business expansion plans. So John Chrysostom's teaching here is no small thing!