

Becoming

1 Kings 19:3-8

August 9, 2015

People often ask David and me how what our preaching schedule is, how we decide who's preaching when, how we organize our sermonizing for the year. I am both grateful and somewhat astonished that anyone would actually use the word 'organized' in relation to us;

We're not.

The truth is, our preaching schedule is generally decided on Monday or Tuesday by figuring out which of us has something we want to say that next Sunday, and if we both want to talk, which is not uncommon, then we arm-wrestle for it.

(There's a mental image.)

This summer, though, we *are* a tad more organized --

David, as you may have noticed, was your preacher for all of July, and I'm taking August.

(If no one is here next Sunday, I'll know that announcing that was a terrible mistake.)

Which means that this is actually my first time up here since our Appalachia mission trip back in the first week of July --

my first chance to share with you a little about this year's trip.

First thing to tell you:

you should be proud.

You are part of a church that made possible the sending of 219 people into the mountains of West Virginia to work their tails off, repairing homes for people in need.

Thirty-one homes were worked on,

thirty-one homes where there are babies living, and grandmas, and grandpas, and hard-working folks who can't make ends meet,

and who are grateful beyond words that there are Connecticut teens who want to spend a week fixing things.

What I get to do all week is to go to a different home each day, and work with a different bunch of kids, and see what they're really up to.

And what they're really up to, I gotta tell you, is good stuff.

The first crew I hung out with started their week laying insulation in an attic,

and attic is a generous word --
 they had to remove part of the ceiling in the front room,
 climb up into a crawl space too small to do more than wriggle,
 and somehow lay fiberglass insulation all along the rafters.
 And it's hot and it's itchy and not a lot of fun,
 until you listen to Charlie, the homeowner, talk about how cold it was last winter when
 the hard snows came.
 "Just about froze here," he said. "But it's going to be toasty warm this winter!"

The next house I went to had buckets everywhere inside --
 the roof leaked into every room.
 Our group was putting on a tin roof, working together like a well-oiled machine,
 measuring each piece with utmost care so it would fit perfectly, no gaps, no leaks.
 Mary kept coming out of her living room just to look at her new roof.
 "It's just the prettiest thing there is, isn't it?" she said to me.
 And it was.

And I saw porches fixed so no one would fall through the rotted floors anymore,
 and siding put up so the wind wouldn't whip through,
 and drainage ditches dug so the water would find somewhere else to go than into the
 foundation.

I saw a lot of projects, I saw a lot of things patched and shored up and strengthened
 and made warmer and safer.
 And you know what? I saw a lot of *people* strengthened, too, a lot of *people* fixed up.
 I saw our kids strengthened by the realization of what they could do,
 I saw a lot of hearts patched up, hearts that had worn thin from hurt and need.
 I saw faith shored up, spirits raised up, hope lifted up.

And I realized: the truth is each one of us needs a fair amount of work.
 Each one of *us* is kind of like God's work project.
 Just like the 31 homes that our folks were turned loose on, those 31 houses that
 needed some attention,
 well, we all, each in our own way, we all need some attention.
 We are all, each one of us, works in progress, and it's God who's at work on us.
 We're *God's* projects.

We need shoring up, strengthening, patching up and mending.
Pretty much all the time.
We are works in progress.

The Appalachia Service Project folks pick a theme for each summer,
and this year the theme was just one word: Becoming.

Becoming.

They were asking us to think about the ways in which our service to others this
summer would help us become something more, something new, someone new.

In other words, they too were saying: we are works in progress.

We are still working on becoming the person God wants us to be,
becoming closer to God,

becoming something like what we were created for.

We're not there yet, any of us.

We are becoming.

The scripture story that Emily read to you is about someone who is a work in progress,
someone still working on becoming what God wants him to be.

He is very definitely God's work project,

and in the scene Emily read, God needs to put a whole lot of work into him to shore up
his spirit, and repair his foundation.

The person is the prophet Elijah,

who frankly was one heck of a religious bigshot back then,

and probably the last person that anyone THOUGHT would need a little help.

And Elijah has just had the biggest moment of his life,

he's won the prophetic equivalent of the World Series, or the Masters or Wimbledon or
the Triple Crown -- wait, that's horses, but you get my drift.

He's won big.

He's just had a huge showdown, as Emily mentioned, with kind of the rival team.

The priests of the local god, Ba-al, had been trash-talking him repeatedly, saying 'our
God's bigger than yours', and all of this had led to the ultimate, um priest-off? Not sure
what to call it. A big challenge.

The deal was that each contestant was to build an altar, sacrifice an animal on it --
sorry, it was the old times, it's how they did things,

and then ask their particular God to send fire down upon the altar.
To cut to the chase, Baal didn't show up, Yahweh did.
Elijah's God sent an impressive fireball onto his altar,
proving, well, my God's bigger than yours.

I'll be honest. It's not my favorite chapter of the Bible -- I don't love the pyrotechnics
and the name-calling of chapter 18.

But Chapter 19, where we are now -- that's where I can see my God at work.

At the end of chapter 18 we've found out that the Queen happened to be a big fan of
Baal, and isn't particularly happy about how things went.

And so Elijah is now on the run.

And he's in the wilderness.

And he's lonely, and he's exhausted, and he's tired of being a prophet of God.

So at a point when his faith should be at an all-time high,
it's actually at a low ebb.

And he lies down under a tree, all tuckered out,
and he says "I've had it. I'm done with being a prophet."

So now, now he's God's project.

Now Elijah needs some attention, some fixing up, some repair.

And that's what God does.

In this, I think, beautiful little story,

God sends an angel, it says,

who gently touches Elijah on the shoulder,

and says: hey, you're not alone out here.

Hey, look, I've brought you bread for your hunger,

and water for your thirst.

And it's enough. It's enough, this gentle touch,

this reminder that he's not alone,

this gift of strength and sustenance for the road ahead.

God fixes him up, shores him up, raises him up, and reminds him who he is,
whose he is.

I love this story about Elijah, because he's very human, this prophet of God.

He's very us. He can go from being so full of faith that anything seems possible, to being completely unsure of anything.

So God has to work with him, work *on* him.

God has to go and meet him in his wilderness, in his desert place, and offer him bread for the journey, water for his thirst, encouragement for the journey ahead.

Aren't we all Elijah in the wilderness sometimes?

Which is to say, aren't we all something less than perfect?

Aren't there times when we are less a prophet of GOD and more a *project* of God?

Times when faith is at a low ebb, when our spirits are dry and our souls are hungry and we are just not sure what we're up to.

Times maybe when we don't feel exactly Christlike, when life has made us crabby or the world seems just a tad overwhelming and we're not doing such a good job of being God's creation.

We are all works in progress -- a couple steps forward and one or two back ... like Elijah.

And just like for him, God comes and finds us where we are.

Gets to work on us.

Offers us bread for the hungering spirit, waters of life for the thirsting soul.

Comes to us as the whisper of reassurance, the voice of encouragement.

Comes to us in the form of angels, the people around us, to shore us up and patch us up and fix us up and get us going again.

Isn't that why we come here?

To let God get to work on us.

To remember that we are God's project, that we are works in progress,

that we are becoming, always becoming, not there yet, always still becoming.

We need, each of us, as much fixing up as anyone around us, and here, right here, is where we admit it.

There's a movie out this summer that's about becoming, about someone who realizes that they need some fixing up, some help. About someone who discovers that they're out in the wilderness and it's pretty lonely out there.

Now, when I tell you what the movie is, you're going to think you should go see it, and I need to tell you, please don't.

Or at least, please only go if you were planning to go, and do not put this on me. Because there's really no way a pastor should be recommending this movie to you. It is easily the most raunchy movie I have ever seen.

Also hysterically funny.

So, I'm talking about *Trainwreck*, the comedy starring Amy Schumer.

I saw it three weeks ago, and without naming any names, I saw it while sitting right behind a lovely couple who belong to this church, and I'm not sure who was more embarrassed: them when they discovered they had just sat down in front of their pastor, or me when I laughed so hard I snorted, at a really inappropriate joke. We'll compare notes some day.

So, now that I've offered this HUGE caveat,

Trainwreck really is a story about being a work in progress.

The title says it all: the main character, when we meet her, lives a trainwreck of a life. She drinks too much, smokes too much, avoids commitment like the plague, goes in and out of relationships in which she treats partners like dirt, and constantly mocks her very sweet and sensible sister for her sweet and sensible life.

At one point, another character in the film, a gentle and earnest guy, says to her simply "you're not nice." And she's not, particularly.

The reviewer in the *Atlantic Monthly* pointed out that Amy Schumer had blazed a new path by creating the first female lead who is, as he put it, a Lady Jerk.

Yes.

And what happens is that, well, God gets to work on her.
 NOW, granted, that's my pastoral perspective. God is not an obvious character in the movie -- Morgan Freeman does not make an appearance.
 But people enter Amy's life who begin to show her that jerkiness is not a great way to live,
 that love and connection make for a much better life,
 that forgiveness needs both to be offered and sought.
 They bring out of the very lonely wilderness she's created for herself;
 they're angels, as it were.
 And in the end, in its own totally raw and raunchy way, *Trainwreck* ends up being a reminder that God's not done with any of us yet.
 We are, every one of us, works in progress.

At the end of our Appalachia week,
 I asked the teens, and adults, on the trip, to let me know what they had felt themselves becoming on this trip.
 That is to say, what God was working on in them.
 SO on a big piece of canvas which will now hang in the Barn, under the word ***Becoming***, they wrote these words:
 Conscious of others
 Less Judgmental
 Happier
 Selfless
 Grateful
 More Christ-like
 More perfect
 A better servant
 More spiritual
 Proud to be me
 And this one, which surely gladdened the heart of GOD;
 Becoming, it said, a better version of myself.

In the end, that's what God's working on in all of us:
 making us better versions of ourselves.

We are, we *are*, works in progress.
We do so well and then we do so poorly;
faith is followed by fear is followed by faith again;
we live compassionately and courageously, and then we falter.
We get it, we forget it, and we get it again.
And in all of it, in all of it, God is at work on us, we who are God's projects:
patching us up and setting us right,
shoring up the weak places and fixing the foundations.
Making us better versions of ourselves.

Work in progress, the sign outside the church should say.

Work in progress.

Thank God, Amen.