

Where Did You Lose Your Cutting Edge?
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2 Kings 6:1-7
Acts 26:9-16

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One of the challenges for every pastor, and indeed for every person of faith, is how to look at familiar passages in the Bible with new eyes, how to continue to see Scripture as fresh and relevant to our lives. Sometimes the stories in the Bible seem so unrelated to our own times and circumstances that it is hard for us to make much sense of them. Many of us might feel like the birds in this poem:

*There once were three owls in a wood, who read the Good Book when they could,
What the words were about, they could never make out,
But, they felt it was doing them good.*

I would wager that sometimes many of us feel this way. Portions of the Bible may seem so tied to the history and culture of an ancient people in a distant land that they might appear irrelevant to the issues of our time. As the poem says, "what the words are about, we can never make out"! Sometimes, there don't seem to be any hooks on these old Bible stories that will snag on the edges of our modern lives.

But, grace happens when we hear these stories in a new way, or see them through different lenses. For me, this often happens when I hear another person's interpretation of a Bible passage based on her own life experience. One such time was about 20 years ago while I was attending a clergy retreat. I had the opportunity to hear Mary Cosby, a nationally known speaker and writer, and a member of the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. Her text was the passage that Lorene read from 2 Kings just now.

This is a story about the prophet Elisha. He was asked by his followers, the other prophets who lived with him, to go down to the riverbank and cut trees in order to build a larger shelter where all could live more comfortably. As they were working, one of the younger prophets became distressed because his axehead flew off and sank into the river. One of the human touches to this scene is that he is especially upset because he had borrowed it. Then, the prophet Elisha performs a miracle, causing the iron axehead to rise from the bottom of the river and float to the surface, allowing the junior prophet to claim it back.

Now, at first glance, this does not seem to be a story which conveys a message to communities of faith in the twenty-first century. But Mary Cosby showed me that much can be gleaned from what first might be considered an insignificant tale. She pointed out that Elisha had asked the distraught man to show him where he lost the axehead. Elisha essentially asked the question, "**Where did you lose your cutting edge?**"

"Where did you lose your cutting edge?" Now there is a question that hooks into our personal, corporate, and congregational lives right in the Here and Now! Perhaps it is an inquiry for some of us as we move from youth to middle age, or from a professional life into retirement. Maybe it is a question for some of us as we assess where we are in our careers, or our relationships, or our family lives. Perhaps it is even an appropriate question for a church from time to time.

I imagine that most of us here have sometimes felt like axe handles without a head. It may feel like we are beating ourselves up on many different fronts and not making a dent in the problems that continue to plague us. We have lost our cutting edge. We have lost our idealism in the very real waters of everyday existence.

Sometimes this feeling may be particularly strong when we get caught up in routine, when our day-to day schedules start to become tedious and unsatisfying. We look around us and say, "Is this it?" Or maybe it happens after we were caught up in a cause, a great event, a moving experience where we felt energized and excited, sharp and focused. Time passes, and maybe, as the ordinary closes in around us again, we begin to feel let down.

Our idealism has been crushed too many times, our journeying has led us to too many dead ends, and we begin to say, "What's the use of trying?" Inertia and apathy creep into the crevices of our lives. We start to feel like we are stuck in a rut, unable to move forward. We feel discouraged, and dull, and sorry for ourselves. This is when we need someone to grab us gently by the shoulders, look us in the face, and ask us, **"Where did you lose your cutting edge?"**

Fortunately, our lives, and those of our churches and our communities, can be recharged. God's power restores the cutting edge. It is there within our grasp if we but reach out our hand to take it. We realize that there is a purpose that remains with us in spite of all the tedium, dead-ends and discouragement in our lives. This purpose, this vision, is the golden thread which runs through all our days and binds all together.

It is the vision of the world God calls us to create together, a world where justice rolls like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream, a world where no child is hungry or abused, where decent housing and affordable health care and good education are rights for everyone and not privileges for a few, a world where God's beautiful creation is protected rather than exploited, and a world where there is peace between peoples of all races, all nationalities, and all religions.

It is a vision that helps us reach out and pick up our cutting edge again. And we need vision. The verse in Proverbs says it well: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." And why is this true? It is because we are spiritual beings. We are creatures who dream, and that is part of what makes us human. We are created in the image of God, and God is a dreamer.

God dreamed, and worlds came into being. We dream, and diseases are cured, books are written, divided communities are healed. Without a dream, without a vision, we are like an axe handle without a head. Without a vision we get tired and dull, fizzle out, and finally perish.

One of my favorite hymns is "Be Thou My Vision, O Lord of My Heart". God can be the vision that breaks into the ordinariness of our lives. The Kingdom of God is here among us, even now, and it can recharge and transform us over and over again, and then, we in turn, can transform our world.

Let's return to those verses we just read from Acts. Paul is before King Agrippa, defending himself against the charges brought against him by the Jews. Paul describes how he was taken by surprise by a vision of God as he journeys to Damascus. Paul writes:

On one such expedition I was going to Damascus, armed with full powers and a commission from the chief priests, and at midday as I was on my way, I saw a light brighter than the sun come down from heaven. It shone brilliantly round me and my fellow travelers. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you, kicking like this against the goad.' Then I said: 'Who are you Lord?' And the Lord answered, 'I am Jesus, and you are persecuting me. But get up and stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for this reason: to appoint you as my servant and as witness of this vision in which you have seen me, and of others in which I shall appear to you.'

Paul not only experiences a life-changing encounter with the risen Christ, he is told the purpose of this dramatic vision. He is told that Jesus has appeared to him for two reasons, to appoint Paul as his servant, and to make Paul a witness. A witness is one who has seen an important thing and must tell others about it.

And so, in the times when we feel we have lost our cutting edge, we can take heart and remember that we too have been given a vision for a purpose. Our hopes and dreams, our visions of a world that can be but is not yet, these visions are for a purpose, not just for our own spiritual enhancement. We, too, have been appointed as servants and witnesses, and we have some good work to do together! We have big dreams and important causes to pursue. But we need to always remember that our most important purpose, the one for which we were made, the one that requires a sharp edge, is to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. This is our vocation as people of faith, our work together as the church.

Remember those words of Jesus in Matthew:

Then God will say to those on his right hand, "Come...take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundations of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick, and you visited me, in prison and you came to me...I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.

The person who knows that he or she lives best by loving extravagantly, that person will keep her cutting edge. And the church which is invested and involved in helping others, reaching out, speaking truth to power, making the effort to put faith to work, that church will find ways to stay sharp and in focus.

Anne Lamott, in her book **Traveling Mercies**, writes about why she makes her seven-year old son go to church:

The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want- which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy- are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith; they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians- people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful...

Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food. When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. (Traveling Mercies, Random House, 1999; p. 100).

We live in dark times, and when times are dark, we need brothers and sisters who can help us hold on. We need those who can see that we are feeling tired, or defeated, or disillusioned and can love us into action again. We need someone to tell us that though the burden we carry is heavy, we can still go on.

You may remember the part in Tolkein's *Fellowship of the Ring* when Frodo, the hobbit, tells the kindly wizard, Gandalf, that he feels overwhelmed with the responsibility of being a force for good in a world which seems increasingly dark with the power of evil.

"I wish the ring had never come to me", says Frodo. "I wish none of this had happened."

"So do all who live to see these times," Gandalf answers him. "But that is not for us to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us."

All of us here have been given time and life, and the intelligence and energy to choose what we do with them. We have also been given this amazing, sometimes frustrating, often inspiring and very human family of faith known as Elon Community Church. We know that our church is not perfect. We know that our individual lives are not perfect. We will fall down and whine and sometimes break promises. We will occasionally get too comfortable, too self-centered, too tired or too distracted. We might lose our cutting edge, sometimes more than once.

But the good news is that God's love can restore the meaning, and we can trust that the missing point will float to the surface. Thanks be to God for the grace which re-charges and refreshes us! Thanks be to God that we can reach out our hand and pick up a miracle!

AMEN.