

11th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.13.23

1 Kings 19:9-18

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces 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 of sheer silence.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (588)

“What are you doing here?”

This is the question the Lord asked Elijah: “What are you doing here?”

He was in a cave in the wilderness of Beersheba in Judea, Elijah was; and he was hiding from Jezebel. That's one way to think about what he was doing there.

Jezebel was the queen of Israel, queen by marriage: she had married Ahab, who was the Israelite king from about 870 BCE to 850, a reign of two decades or so. But she herself was from Tyre, which is in what's now Lebanon. It was an old city even then. Still one of the longest-time inhabited cities in the world, Tyre was founded around 2750 BCE, making it 1700 years older than Israel.

This might be why Jezebel exercised such tremendous power in Israel—that she was from a much more established culture and nation. And she did exercise such tremendous power, though she was a foreigner. Maybe it was like when King Charles might visit America, and suddenly all us Yankees act like royalists. Lining the streets to catch a glimpse of the royal pageantry, we went to great lengths to break with them, to differ from them. But they come into town with their ancient rites and their beautiful robes and capes and crowns, and suddenly we want a closer look at it all. It's captivating!

This pagan queen held a lot of sway even in Jewish Israel.

Or maybe I'm overthinking it. It might just have been about how powerless Ahab was by comparison, just on a personality level. Whatever power the Israelite native Ahab exercised, it was more in its abdication. A lot happened during his reign that were scandals of weakness rather than strength, or scandals of capitulation rather than domination.

Chief among those scandals was the establishing of Canaanite religion over and against Judean and Israelite practice. Ahab had an altar to Ba'al built in the capital city of Israel, Samaria—Ba'al being the god of his queen, Jezebel. This move is credited for the terrible fortune that befell the people afterward—drought, and then Jezebel's persecution of the prophets of Yahweh. Indeed, Ahab is in this very book, 1st Kings, referred to as “more evil than all the kings before him.”

And this might all sound like superstition. It might be easy to dismiss this return of Ba'al to prominence in the region over and against the Lord of the Jews, this later revealed god, as so much slightly silly abstraction. I mean, which altar is to be revered, the one to Ba'al or the one to Yahweh, the Lord God of the Jews: it's like whether the Methodist church has more prominence in town than the Congregationalist church. Really, when it comes right down to it, what does it matter?

But the question was actually more consequential than that, much more. The worship of Ba'al was a much bloodier affair, might even have involved the sacrifice of children—a practice that

the way of the Jews was a distinctive move very much against. This though ancient way, which (monstrous as it seems to us) was commonly thought acceptable and well ordered. And it's in contrast to this accepted practice, and others of this bloody sort, that the Jews and their Lord emerged and made a way as distinct, very different. The worship of Yahweh was a quite deliberate departure from so much "primitive religion," and its wild spilling of blood, its capricious playing with right and wrong, love and death.

Unfortunately though, this still new way in the long-ago world, the worship of Yahweh, was quite a bit less exciting than all that. When you consider the most basic tenants of the way of the Jews, it's actually not much of a religion at all—not in its earliest forms anyway. It was a matter of considering the other ahead of the self. Honor your father and mother. Don't violate your neighbors—neither their marriages nor their household goods. Indeed, love them as you love yourself. Don't murder. Don't steal. Rather, consider the poor, the orphan and widow and stranger in your midst.

And don't put anything higher in your mind for worship than the Lord, Yahweh, he who is being and becoming; he who named himself "I am that I am" or "I am that I will be"; he who prizes such consideration of the other more than anything else, who desires not sacrifice but justice, in which there will be peace.

And for all this, nations would stream to them, so it was promised. Because there would be justice within their walls, because there would be peace among the people and even in the land and in the growing of things, because even the worst off among the people of Yahweh would be well off, nations would aim to be like them.

That's what was promised. That's what was prophesied.

But now there was this encroaching of the older way, the way of blood and guts, blood and soil.

Because, the thing is, such practice is difficult. Such cool-headed obedience to a law whose aims are peace and justice in worship of a God who is but being and becoming: this is difficult, quite a bit more difficult than the ramped-up, amped-up practice of pagan rites. It's so much easier to believe in a god who arrives like a storm or an earthquake or a devouring fire, rather than one who dwells in the sound of sheer silence, the sound and persistence of being.

Like, did you have the sense, as I had the sense, during the Trump presidency that some of his most ardent fans liked him as president because he wasn't boring? Like, it's better to be exciting even if destructive than to be boring even if effective in enacting good public policy. Trump was

our first pagan president. That's what I think. And he whipped up such a state in people that more than a few woke up from their head-trip around January 6th to ask of themselves, "What was I thinking?" Really, I want Trump back in the Oval Office about as much as Elijah wanted Jezebel in Samaria. Here's hoping I'm not as alone in my aversion as Elijah was in his. Here's hoping...

Because he truly did seem to be the only one left in all Israel to want Yahweh back on the throne of people's faithfulness. He truly did seem to be alone in this. Everyone else seemed to love the spectacle of Ba'al. Everyone else seemed enthralled at the show of it, the smattering steady dread of it. Even the *priests* of Israel were tearing down the means for the worship of the Lord. Like Josh Hawley, a *senator*, giving the old "thumbs up" to the capital raiders. Aren't you supposed to be governing?

And for this Elijah had gone on a purge of his own, it should be said here. Elijah had slaughtered all the pagan priests he could get his hands on, zealously sure he was doing the Lord's work.

And when all that was finished, when his own spree was exhausted, he retreated to the cave in Beersheba to hide—for now Jezebel would come after him. It would have come down to these two, Elijah and Jezebel. And she had an army.

"Elijah, what are you doing here?"

What he was doing was awaiting his own death, hoping to die quietly alone in a cave rather than at the end of the queen's sword or as a sacrifice in one of her rites.

But what the Lord knew Elijah to be doing here was awaiting a new word from this old Lord Being, a new word to go and anoint a new generation of those who would be faithful to this Lord of God of all Being.

"What are you doing here?"

You know, God might have asked Jesus this as well. "What are you doing here, in this withdrawn place in the middle of the night all alone?"

This reading from this morning picks up where last week's reading left off—with Jesus having heard the dreadful news of John's murder, which unnerved him more than anyone ever seems to notice it did—for where went John so went Jesus, meaning if Jesus were to stay on this course, he would likely end up murdered at the capricious hands of imperial power too.

Then there's the fact that John and Jesus were cousins, friends. The loss of this one, the loss by sudden, humiliating violence: it was perhaps more than Jesus could take.

So, he withdrew to a deserted place by himself.

But then the crowds also heard—about John, so terrible, so unjust! So, they sought Jesus, following him into his withdrawal, which effectively made it so he was put upon yet again. The crowd would grow numerous, and the day would grow late, and everyone would grow hungry, and it would all redound to Jesus to do something about it—though it was the very doing something about such things that put him in danger in the first place. His performing mighty deeds of healing and caring and restoring were the very things that had him in the crosshairs of the authorities, religious and Roman, in the first place.

There was no getting out of this.

But what if really wanted to get out of this?

The story gives us reason to think he did. “Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side...” making this is the only time in the gospel narrative that Jesus is seen to send his disciples ahead of him. This, from someone who many times told people, “Follow me.” This, from someone upon whose resurrection it is said of him from the tomb, “He is not here; he has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” This, from someone who rebuked a most prominent disciple, Peter, when Peter rebuked him that the crucifixion must never happen to him: Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Get behind me, Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Here alone he’s said to have sent his disciples ahead of him, to wait alone in the wilderness as if to wonder whether he could really do it, as if to wonder whether he really *had* to do it: make present the reign of God, resist the urge to defend himself at any cost, allow the world to do its worst because in such allowance is the true revelation of what is God’s way even in this cruel, capricious world—peace, self-giving, encountering evil and offering it good, encountering slander and speaking truth.

Maybe he wouldn’t have to do it. It could him killed, he was beginning to be quite certain. It *would* get him crucified, we all now well know.

So maybe he could get out of this...? Maybe it might redound to someone else? Go on ahead, everyone. We’ll see who copes best. And maybe it might be someone other than him. Maybe it might not have to be him. Maybe.

But look, the disciples, having gone ahead, didn’t land any of them in the position to do it instead. Caught in a storm, unable to make any headway, they would, it now seemed clear, traverse the way of God only if they had someone to follow in walking such a way.

It was Jesus.

It had to be Jesus—which he himself confesses when he identifies himself to the disciples. They’ve declared at the sight of him walking across the storm-tossed water, “It is a ghost!” But he rather says, “Take heart, it is I. Take it easy; it’s me.” In Greek this is *ego eimi*, which is precisely how God first named God-self at the burning bush to Moses: *YHWH*, I am, *ego eimi*. So here indeed is God, here indeed is eternal being, life which is sustained not by death but by life, life whose fuel isn’t death but is life, sustained and sustaining being, he and no other.

So, this was one last moment of temptation, this quick exchange between Peter and Jesus on the storm-tossed sea that caps off this night of withdrawal, grief, and dread. This is one last moment of temptation, which even had the words of the original tempter find voice. Peter asked of Jesus just as the devil in the wilderness had asked of Jesus: “*If you are the son of God...*” which sets an agenda for Jesus that it was his duty to prove it. In the wilderness with the devil, with each command to begin with these words put to Jesus, “*If it is you, God...*” Jesus resisted it, essentially saying to the devil, “No. I don’t need to prove it, neither to you nor to myself.” With this one, though, Peter saying, “*If it is you, God...*” he went with it. He did what Peter asked him to do, which was to command him to come to him across the water.

It didn’t go well. Peter began to sink, but Jesus helped him rise, which now he would do to himself as well, rise and proceed to be the Christ, him crucified and raised so the world might know eternal life.

“What are you doing here?”

No, I mean it: what are *you* doing here? In this old place, in this largely empty place where maybe once it was more crowded than this, if not every pew filled than at least every other pew. Maybe. I don’t know. Berkshire county has always had more pews than people to fill them all. What are you doing here?

Because it’s no longer enough not to really know, just to have it as habit or as if a commonly accepted thing as the right thing to do on Sundays. The larger social world presents too strong a tide against this practice for it to glide along as “something you should do.” What’s more, too much has happened within the church in all its forms, from the abuse of children to the abuse of the tax code, for us to be able to claim without critique some moral high ground.

What are we doing here?

Well, if we’re anything like others we heard of this morning, we’re thinking maybe God is done with us and that we’re done with God, that maybe there’s little left for us to do but quit or

die. And maybe that would be something of a relief. This is hard work, keeping all this going. And we've been doing this for a long time, many of us.

And, really, who are we?

Are we Elijah, the great prophet who found himself alone in the task of trying to wean people off their bloodlust (not least his own) as if this is worship, as if the power of spectacular death is somehow an expression of God, proof of God's presence, proof of God's might; alone in his task and at a moment in history where it seemed all progress toward just peace really could be lost?

Are we Jesus, in whom the very presence of God comes to dwell and without whom we might more easily have continued in our thinking that might makes right, that the loudest voices in the room are the ones who speak the truth?

No, we are neither of these.

So, what are we doing here?

I think the question has to come down to each of us.

What I'm doing here is enacting my belief, my tested belief, that words have creative power, and words that retell the story of God who is being and his Christ who is love, words made creatively powerful by the pulsing presence of the Holy Spirit which runs through them like breath that gives life, all have the power to create being in love.

What's more, what I'm doing here is acting in resistance of what I also think is true, that not to tell this story of being in love is to let other stories rise to even greater prominence and insistence: that you are what you earn, that your worth is what you can prove, that your being here must be justified by something impressive, that your story is only as important as the wider world ratifies it to be, and that this unjust world is unjust so just go with it and try to get yours while you can. Hell in a handbasket, so make sure your handbasket has leather interiors and climate control.

What I'm doing here is calling forth the one who first called me and in whom I also have access to you, and an opening up to you, that we might find one another and act together as if love has the power to recreate this whole beautiful, terrible world—recreate it as in the beginning or finally finish as at the perfect, consummate end, so it might be the very reign of God, sustained and sustaining life, being in love.

That's what I'm doing here.

What about you?

Thanks be to God.