

10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 8.9.20

### **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?"<sup>10</sup> 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."<sup>11</sup>

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;<sup>12</sup> 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?"<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,<sup>24</sup> but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.<sup>25</sup> And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.<sup>26</sup> But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.<sup>27</sup> But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."<sup>28</sup> Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."<sup>29</sup> He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.<sup>30</sup> But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"<sup>31</sup> Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you

doubt?"<sup>32</sup> When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.<sup>33</sup> And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (588)

Shortly after I'd met Jesse, right when we'd begun dating, he brought me to my first drug company junket. As an intern at the Cambridge Hospital, he was often invited to meet with drug company representatives, good looking salespeople come to town to market some or other drug. They'd attract doctors to area restaurant bars with the promise of free hors d'oeuvres. Once there, the doctors would be subject to sales pitches. Jesse invited me along because I, like him, was strapped for cash. He'd just graduated from medical school, and I was still in divinity school. So, free food, especially at a classy place, was just what I was looking for.

Hobnobbing around Jae's Restaurant in Inman Square (the original Jae's, by the way), I met a few of Jesse's new cohorts. One was a man whom Jesse only barely knew, but well enough to introduce us. Jess explained that I was a student at the divinity school.

"Wow," the man said. "So, you believe in God?"

"Yeah," I said, surprised that we were starting right at the very most basic level.

"Wow," he said again. Like, I was a unicorn! I was a dodo. I was the only one left.

Elijah felt much the same way. A prophet for the kingdom of Israel, Elijah lived during the reign of Ahab and Ahaziah, which was a few kings later than David's rule, and then Solomon's rule. This was a time of some unraveling. After a century or so of strengthening and consolidating, now things were unraveling a bit. Each of the now two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, of the once United Kingdom, would yet enjoy three hundred or so years of sovereignty. As of now, though, there was some disturbing syncretism, an intermixing of Israelites with Canaanites—Canaanites, these from whom the Judeans and Israelites had struggled mightily, under David's glorious war-making reign, to break clean.

Ahab, King of Israel, had now taken Jezebel as his queen.

Or was it that Jezebel had taken Ahab as her king?

She was from Tyre, which is in what's now Lebanon and which (interestingly, if you ask me) is the one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Founded around 2750 BCE, it was, by the time of Jezebel's marrying Ahab, about 1700 years older than the newly founded Israel. And this might be why she had such a strong influence on Ahab and, apparently,

on the culture of his kingdom—that she came from a culture itself more influential, or at least more time-tested.

Or it might be that she had a strong, even overpowering personality, while Ahab was weak. That's what's often was said about him, anyway. According to ancient texts, and even biblical texts, Ahab was not a charismatic leader, was something of a pushover, even a whiner—like when he went to Naboth, who was a subject of Ahab's realm, and demanded that Naboth give him his vineyard, which Naboth wouldn't do, and which caused Ahab to return to palace and pout. He was no David. He wasn't even approaching Solomon. He was someone who would do, but just barely.

A third possibility is that there was something more attractive about Canaanite culture than about Israelite culture—something easier, more basic. Israelite culture, after all, was gathered around this Law, the Torah. And fundamental to the Law was concern for the poor, for the orphan and the widow. Fundamental to Torah was consideration of the other, anyone other than the self—honor your father and mother, do not steal or lie, do not go after the things your neighbor has but find and pursue your own hopes and desires. It was, at its root, a calming, dispassionate gathering force—but it could make for a stable society, and one whose prime mover was love.

As for Tyre and its larger cultural context, Canaan, biblical texts allege monstrous things. Most monstrous among them is that they practiced child sacrifice. This alone shouldn't convince us, as one people will often allege monstrous things against an enemy people. But there's some archeological evidence that this might have been true, especially in Tyre during the Phoenician Period, which is the time period we're talking about here. Many of the gods of that neighboring culture were thought to compel such sacrifice—Moloch, Cronus, Baal. And, although the act was strictly forbidden by Yahweh, the God we meet in the Bible, ancient Israelites and Judeans did come under the influence of their Canaanite neighbors and would occasionally perform their rituals. You see this alluded to in the Bible, and it always is told as a shock to the otherwise civil system.

I imagine such a thing would be a horrifying spectacle, the sort of thing you can't watch but also can't *not* watch. (You know, lynchings would often gather a crowd.)

Jezebel's prophets were active in her new realm. This, live sacrifice, might have been a practice they sought to establish—if only as a possibility.

Absent that, though, there might have been something decadent and spectacle-driven about the culture Jezebel came with overall, and these might have made Israel by contrast seem altogether too mundane, a merely ethical culture. And how could ethics compete with spectacle? How could seriousness stand a chance against shock and awe, scandal and horror? How else do you explain that Trump won the presidency? Didn't he himself boast that he would never become "presidential" because this would be boring and his ratings would go down?

Of course, in recent centuries as regarded Israel and Judah, there had been a lot of spectacle that was attributed to Yahweh's acting in history, acting on behalf of this chosen people. There had been awesome victory in war. There had been amazing rains during times of otherwise punishing drought. But at the root of it all for Israel was a rather simple ethic: love, love God and love your neighbor as yourself with particular concern for the widow and the orphan. Love as the gathering force, love as the essential nature of the king, the *true* king, which is to say the Lord, the living God who was the generative force behind this people who otherwise were no people. The earthly kings of Israel and Judah were a compromise, something the people insisted upon and the Lord God acquiesced to. But their true king, indeed the whole creation's true king, was always and ever after to be the living Lord, the Lordship of love.

Elijah stood for this. Elijah alone apparently stood for this.

"Elijah, what are you doing here?"

What he was doing there was waiting for his own death. He preferred that it might come in the wilderness of Beersheba, which belonged to Judah; preferred that to meeting a surely more violent end back in Israel where Jezebel was seeking his life. She had already seen to the hunting down of most of the rest of Israel's prophets. Elijah really was one of the few left—and not only of the prophets but of all the people yet loyal to the covenant that was all about community, peaceful and just. (It bears saying, of course, that how the land for that was won is another matter. It was won in war, cleared of its people for this new people. Any time you win land, it involves war, which is only hardly about justice, to say nothing of love.)

So, it's true that Elijah, in his so-called zeal, slaughtered Jezebel's prophets who were at work in the land. They were presumably propagating their way of life and worship, which might

merely have amounted to pledging loyalty to Baal or might have amounted to offering sacrifice in his name or might have amounted to offering live burnt sacrifice, even children, even babies, to him as some appeasement and need of favor.

Where would be the line for you?

Where would be the encroachment of something debased into a place of sanctity or seriousness such that you could stand it no longer?

It might not be wrong religious practice that offends you so deeply, but I imagine there's something. I would *hope* there's something.

This is *not* a modern story, so I don't mean to turn Elijah into a modern hero, one whose principals are exactly as ours are, to say nothing of his way or manner. Killing all the prophets of Jezebel means something to our sensibilities other than what it would have meant 2500 years ago when this story was written down and Elijah was hailed as great. And thank God those sensibilities have changed. This is progress. This, I would say, is Christ at work in the world. That the one whom we hail not as a hero but as our savior revealed the act of killing as something way more problematic.

That said, this story of Elijah's having killed all Jezebel's prophets, and now fearing for his own life following Jezebel's having killed all of Israel's prophets but this one remaining, might well be a story in which a lot was at stake. It might well be a story of a clash of cultures, one of which really was a less worthy one, a more dehumanizing one.

Of course, the whole idea of humanism is a modern one. But it strikes me that there's something surprisingly modern at the heart of the theophany Elijah would, in just a few moments, experience.

"Go out," the word of the Lord would tell him, "and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." And when Elijah did, lo, there came a great wind—of the sort that would contain and express the god of wind, Baal-hadad.

But the Lord was not in the wind.

And, lo, there came an earthquake, of the sort that might reveal the god Vulcan.

But the Lord was not in the earthquake.

And, lo, there came a great fire, of the sort that would contain and express Moloch, the god of fire, who demanded burnt offerings, even live burnt offerings.

But the Lord was not in the fire.

And, lo, there came to be a sound of sheer silence. The sound of mere existence. Of mere being. Do you hear it?

The Lord, the God of Israel and Judah, whose name is YWHW, which is to say “I Am” or “I Am that I Am” or “I Am That I Shall Be,” which is to say something of being and becoming—this God was here, in the sound of sheer silence. The God of Jesus, and the God of the Church, the Being in whom we each and all live and move and have our being, this which Martin Buber would come to call “Thou,” is the one who is ever present should we ever turn to the one as “You” or the more intimate “Thou.”

And the transcendent imminence of this God, which demands a universalism mostly unimagined as of now when Ezekiel listened to the sound of sheer silence, and even to this, our day, quite unimaginable, is going to make it tough to bear witness to this One. It’s just not all that impressive, the on-goingness of all being. This God whose work is patient and pervasive, this God whose effect is slow and sustaining: no wonder Elijah felt all alone with this project. The rip of a tornado is simply more impressive than the steady sustaining of no tornado. The mighty destruction of an earthquake is simply more awesome than the placid pleasantness of no earthquake. And the god who demands live sacrifice, and then gets it, is simply more intimidating and impressive than this God who demands living sacrifice, a life devoted to love and justice.

I mean, where’s the evidence for the presence of such a God who commands not death but life—

Where, but all around us and among us and within us.

“So, you believe in God?” people might ask. And then they might ask you for proof, or at least argument. And it isn’t nice to say to such people, “You haven’t thought too hard about this, have you?” But you can *think* that.

What are you doing here? Elijah was waiting to die. What about you? What about us?

This is a question that has come to most mainline Protestant congregations that I know of. The machine that used to be the mainline, running on its own momentum, has wound itself down in recent decades. This is no longer a given. This is something hard won and newly driven by mission, by a strong and articulable sense of purpose.

If you ask me, this is good news, a joyful new development. I know people in ministry who feel this as bruising—this loss of status, this loss of respect. I know people in congregations who feel this as grievous—the now missing assumption that the question isn’t whether you go to church but which one you go to. (and from that could be extrapolated all sorts of useful information. Episcopal? Ah. Presbyterian? Mm. Baptist? Well...) But, frankly, if our congregations were a given in people’s lives and the message of the church were so in tandem with the message of our wider context, I honestly don’t know what I would say on any given Sunday.

I just read *The Age of Innocence*, an incredibly deft book, and every once in a while, the feckless, useless characters would find themselves in church—a gracious affair, so well appointed. And there would be mention of the pastor and the service. But Wharton would mention no word of what might actually have been preached. And I realized as I read that this is because it really didn’t matter because no one was listening. What mattered was that the lives of those gathered in the pews continued on unruffled even following worship.

The thing is, in the forty years since the mainline Church has been sidelined, our wider culture has taken leave of itself in important ways.

It’s true, there have been social gains when it comes to civil rights. It’s true that there have been very important gains when it comes to the reckoning white people are amidst, the lie of our supremacy coming to face the truth that all people deserve the blessings of freedom and opportunity, that the enslavement of black people and the clearing out of native people is a crime of such proportion that its repair demands something of the same proportion. This reckoning has been too long in the coming and, that it is now here, we should all rejoice.

That said, there’s been a looting from the top that runs counter to what social gains we might be thought to have made. Ours, this economy, built on “enlightened self-interest,” has become dark indeed. It’s a monstrous version of itself, flowing from the creed it is that greed is good. Our politics and common life, built on a distorted, unmoored understanding of freedom, have become reactive, which is the very opposite of being free—for freedom doesn’t mean that we should be able to do whatever we want whenever we want to, but that we might each and all come to such full humanity that we are free and enabled to choose the good, which is a *common* good, love for neighbor as for self. And though people will say they can be “good without God,” there is only the vaguest imaging of what is good.

That vague picture gets more fully drawn in church. That fuzzy picture of what is good—be it greed or what feels good or what makes me happy or what gets me ahead—gets more fully and truly drawn in church, where we recognize that it is none of these but is something altogether more elevated and more concerned with the other, where we pray to the Living God and we gather in the Holy Spirit to train ourselves on the way of Christ, which is the way not of personal fulfillment but of self-giving love.

We're cultivating something here, something that we simply must be intentional about cultivating because it doesn't come easy and it doesn't come naturally, not to us humans, not to the likes of us who are far more complicated than that. We can tell ourselves a good story. We can justify ourselves like no other creature before us. For all *that*, the world would be the poorer without *this*, our intention. Lenox, Monterey would be the poorer without this, our cultivated intention to seek the good that is of God, to enact the good that is of Christ and him crucified, to live out the good that is as blessing to all the creation.

So, there it is, the two paths, which Moses lay before the people when they were finally at the edge of the wilderness, the path of living and the path of dying.

Here they are, the two paths as spread before Elijah, who was awaiting his own death but who would, in but a few moments get up and move on.

Here they are, the two paths, as ever, our two choices.

Which shall it be?

Thanks be to God.