

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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Rev. John F. Koerner

First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

I Kings 19:1-18

Then the word of the Lord cam to him saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"
 (I Kings 19:9b N.R.S.V.)

Elijah

Does it bother you when those with wealth and power abuse their wealth and power to take advantage of the little guys? Is God calling you to take a stand for what is right and just, to speak truth to power, to work for God's justice and God's kingdom, and to do so even when it might mean a great sacrifice for you?

If so, then you might be interested in my story. My name is Elijah, sometimes I'm called Elijah the prophet, and sometimes Elijah the Tishbite. They call me the Tishbite because that is my hometown. Tishbe in the land of Gilead. Tishbe is a few miles south of the Lake of Galilee on the East bank of the Jordan River. Those from Israel are called Israelites. Those from the town of Tishbe are called Tishbites.

I once had some kid ask me if they called me Elijah the Tishbite because I had tish bites all over me like mosquito bites, I guess. Then his friend said, "Maybe they called him the Tishbite because he bites tishes?" Kids! What are you going to do?

Actually where I was from is not all that important. What is important, it that I was the prophet of the Living God. That is what I want to talk to you about.

Most people think being a prophet is a glamorous job. Prophets get to stand around and make thunderous pronouncements, "Thus sayeth the Lord!" Prophets get to do powerful miracles that astound and amaze everyone. Prophets are revered figures that people respect and heed.

There is some truth to those stereotypes. Most people remember me for the great miracles associated with my name. There was the time when the Lord sent me to live with the Sidonain widow in Zarephath. She was reluctant to take me in, because she had only enough oil and flour to make one last meal for her and her son. But God told me to tell her that if she would take me, God would provide. And God did provide. While I stayed there the little jar of meal and the little jug of oil never ran out. That was a pretty cool miracle.

Then the widow's son died. I prayed and God brought him back to life. So everyone started

talking about how Elijah could raise the dead. But you know that wasn't me. That was God. All I did was pray and ask.

Then there was the time when I was led to challenge the priests of Baal to a prophet's duel. That was pretty exciting, and also nerve wracking. There was a lot at stake. I challenged them to prove once and for all whose god was real and alive. Each side was to build an altar and place a proper sacrifice on the altar, but no fire. Then each side was to pray to their god to send fire on the sacrifice. The one whose god answered, would win. The one whose god failed to answer would be killed. It was a high stakes duel.

The priests of Baal put on a good show. There were 400 of them and only one of me. So if it were a numbers game, they had the great advantage. They prayed loudly, and danced, and cut themselves with knives spilling their blood on the ground. They kept it up all morning, but at noon they were exhausted and there was no answer from Baal.

So then it was my turn. I had my altar built and a dead bull placed on it for a sacrifice. Then I had a trench dug around the altar and had water poured on everything until it ran down the altar and filled the trench. Then I prayed a short simple prayer. The Lord answered immediately and fire fell from the sky and burned up the sacrifice, the water in the trench around the altar and the very stones of the altar itself were burned up. That was a great miracle and I was riding high that day.

Perhaps the most famous miracle associated with me is the one that occurred at the end of my earthly life. It was witnessed by my protégé Elisha. I was one of only two people mentioned in the Bible that were taken up into heaven without first dying. The first was Enoch, the great, great, great, great, great grandson of Adam. I was the second.

Many people think that I rode up to heaven in a fiery chariot. There was such a chariot, but it merely separated us. God took me up into heaven in a whirlwind. It was a grand exit that God granted me. I'll grant you that.

Still as impressive as those miracles were, they were but a small part of my work as a prophet. Most of the work I did was not glamorous. It was exhausting, grinding, and dangerous work. Prophets are sometimes revered and respected and heeded, but only after they are dead.

I will say that there were a lot of powerful people in Israel in those days who worked hard to make sure that I was revered and respected. That is, they tried to kill me as quickly as possible.

The dangerous part about being a prophet is that prophets are often called to speak God's truth to those in power. That usually means telling powerful people that they are wrong, that God is displeased with them, and that they must change their ways. Powerful people rarely react well to that. And that is an understatement!

I understand that there is a saying in your culture that "Power corrupts and absolute power

corrupts absolutely.” That was as true in my time as yours. Powerful people get used to getting their own way. Powerful people often believe that the rules that apply to others don’t apply to them.

Perhaps, it is different in your time. But in my time, the person who dared to tell a king or queen that they were wrong was a dead man walking.

Perhaps you remember the story of how good King David had an affair, got the woman pregnant, then had her husband killed so that he, King David could marry her. Yes, King David may have been “a man after God’s own heart,” but he still had his faults. He was king, but he was not above God’s law.

The prophet Nathan was given the dangerous job of telling King David that he was wrong and that God was displeased with him. King David was a devout and God fearing man. But even then the prophet Nathan approached him with extreme caution. He tricked King David into declaring his own guilt.

My job was much harder. I had to deal with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Neither of them were God fearing or kind hearted. Ahab was weak, and Jezebel was absolutely ruthless. The truth didn’t matter. God’s law didn’t matter. All that mattered was getting her own way.

I called Ahab out because he coveted his neighbor’s vineyard. Ahab tried to buy the vineyard, but when Nabboth wouldn’t sell it. Jezebel had Nabboth killed and then Ahab claimed the vineyard for himself. I called him out and told him that he was wrong and that God was displeased. That put me on Jezebel’s hit list. She wanted my head. And she had an army to help her get it.

That was bad, but what really fried Jezebel’s brain was when I won the duel with the 400 priests of Baal and had the crowd kill them. I thought that after God had proved himself so powerfully, the nation and the king would repent and turn back to God. I was wrong.

Not only did the nation not turn back to God. Jezebel was more determined than ever to kill me.

Perhaps your leaders do not distort the truth and manipulate the minds of the people in order to get their own way. Perhaps, but I doubt it. The abuse of political power is as old as time itself. That is why prophets are needed.

Jezebel stirred up the population against me. She accused me of using parlor tricks to manipulate people into believing something that wasn’t true. Instead of being a hero of the faith, I was painted as a mad man who provoked a riot and got a bunch of innocent, pure, and holy religious leaders torn apart. And people believed her!

I’m not proud of the fact that I panicked and went screaming into the night. Screaming, but not too loudly, because you know, I was on Jezebel’s most wanted listed. Most wanted dead that is. So I screamed but not too loudly so as not to draw attention to myself.

I hid out in the wilderness and just gave up. I was convinced that I was a failure. That nothing I did was effective or important or made a bit of difference. None of those things were true, but that's how I felt at the moment. Being a prophet is not for the weak of heart, let me tell you.

God came to me there in the wilderness and cared for me. Looking back on that time from heaven I can see as it were footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints where God walked beside me. Sometimes there was only one set of footprints where God carried me. And sometimes there were long jagged marks in the sand. I asked God about those long jagged marks. He said with a smile, "That's where I had to drag you kicking and screaming where you needed to be."

I guess I deserved that one. I did have my stubborn streaks.

In truth God never forced me to go anywhere. What God did do was give me what I needed to go on. After I fled into the wilderness God had me go to a mountain. There God made himself real to me. He came not as a great windstorm, not as a powerful earthquake, but rather in a still small voice. It was a reminder to me that the reason I often missed what God was saying was that I was making too much noise myself. When I stopped my own shouting and fell silent, that is when I really heard God again.

So that is my story. Time for the next prophet. Maybe that's you.

Amen.