

## Elijah the Prophet: When God is Active and When God is Silent

I Kings 19:8-12

In the Hebrew tradition Elijah stood for all the prophets as Moses stood for all the commandments of God. To say Moses and Elijah was to say the Law and the Prophets. His career as a prophet helps us examine how to have faith when God is active and how to have faith when God is silent. When God is active faith is easy; when God is silent, faith can be very hard.

Let's see what his story can say to us about these two seasons of the soul.

### I

The Hebrew prophets were not so much fore-tellers as *forth-tellers*. They spoke forth God's word. What they carried was not a crystal ball but a megaphone.

Today's story is about Elijah speaking forth God's word to king Ahab—yes the same King in last week's sermon about Micaiah the prophet. Frederick Buechner quips:

If generally speaking, a prophet to a king was like ants at a picnic, Elijah was a swarm of bees.<sup>1</sup>

Then there was the king's wife Jezebel, a force herself to be reckoned with. Ahab had made her his wife to secure a political alliance with the king of Phoenicia. The religion of Phoenicia was Baal worship. Baalism began as a fertility religion. Its god insured good crops, flocks, and plenty of babies. Baal brought rain when rain was needed and the sun when the sun was needed.

Jezebel was a devotee of Baal worship. When she moved into the palace, she took over—at least in matters of religion. She set out to force the worship of Baal in Israel and to eliminate the worship of Yahweh. She set up idols, totems and temples to Baal all over the countryside. She installed a whole legion of priests and prophets of Baal and authorized the systematic execution of all the prophets of Yahweh. Such is the peril of state-sponsored religion, then and now.

Baal worship is alive and well in America today. The holy trinity of Baal gods are Power, Wealth and Success. These are the gods in whom we trust. Inscribed on the dollar bill are the words, In God We Trust, but what we trust is the dollar bill itself.

We trust in the god Power, political power, military power, only we use the power to subdue others.

We trust in the god Wealth. The Harvard theologian Harvey Cox has written about "The Market As God." Our morning devotion is looking at the

financial page of the newspaper. There's an Asian religion called Taoism, spelled TAOISM. Our religion is Dowism, spelled DOWISM, the worship of the Dow Jones Average.

And we worship at the altar of the god of Success. If it works, do it. Henry Ford once said, "What's good for business is good for America." We put millionaires and billionaires on pedestals, in church too. *God must be blessing them!*

Look around and you will see the totems of American religion: the dollar bill, the flag, the glossy magazines of the rich and famous.

Baal worship is the perennial religion of all peoples and times. Their altars are everywhere.

## II

The story of Elijah begins as Israel is in the midst of a three-and-a-half-year drought—not so good for Baal worship. God told Elijah he was about to send rain and end the drought and to go to speak to King Ahab. When Ahab saw Elijah entering the royal chambers he said, "Is it really you, you troubler of Israel?!" Elijah said, "It is not I who trouble Israel, but you!" Prophets then and now are often called "troublers" of the nation, but they do not bring trouble, they *reveal* the trouble already there, a trouble that threatens the well-being of the nation.

### III

What ensued was a show-down on Mt. Carmel between the 450 prophets of Baal and the one lone prophet of Yahweh, Elijah. Two altars were set up, one to Baal and the other to Yahweh. Elijah said to the assembly, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions?” You can’t serve Yahweh and Baal-god too! Chose this day whom you will serve. If Yahweh is God, follow him; if Baal is God, follow him!”

Jesus said much the same in the Sermon on the Mount: No one can serve two masters...You can’t serve both God and mammon. “Mammon” is one of Baal’s other names.

Then Elijah set the terms of the contest: You put your bull on one altar, I’ll put my bill on my altar. You pray to your god, and I’ll pray to mine. Whoever’s God sends down fire and lights the altar will be the one true God.

The prophets of Baal yelled “Play Ball!”, and the contest was on. The god of Baal was silent. Yahweh set fire to his altar and the sacrifice was consumed.

It was a pretty heady moment for Elijah. Then he got carried away, *way* carried away. With the trill of the victory coursing through his veins, he had the prophets of Baal seized, and he killed them all. Sometimes we, full of ourselves,

get ahead of God. Elijah who called himself “zealous for the Lord” had become a *zealot*. It happens.

We cringe at the violence, violence done in the name of God. Jesus offered a correction in our picture of God, God as a God of peace not violence. You may remember the time in the gospels when Jesus and his disciples were traveling to Jerusalem and had to go through Samaria, enemy territory for the Jews. He sent his disciples into the villages to find a place where they could stay the night. Everyone they asked refused to give them hospitality. The disciples returned to Jesus and said, “Jesus, you’ve been rejected! Can we call down fire from heaven like Elijah did and destroy them?” Disciples of Jesus can give Jesus a bad name. Jesus rebuked them and said, “The Son of Man did not come to destroy lives but to save them”. Here was Jesus correcting his own Hebrew scripture. The Bible is not flat. It is always moving to the highest plane of revelation.

#### IV

Now comes the second half of the story—when God is silent. Elijah came down the mountain pumped by his victory over the prophets of Baal. But here came Jezebel! Enraged by his slaughter her prophets of Baal, she set out to hunt him down and put his head on a stick.

Elijah fled, scared for his life and wondering why God would let Jezebel have that kind of power. Doubt and despondency flooded over him.

Where he fled was to the mountain of the Lord, Mt. Horeb, which was the Mt. Sinai where God had given to Moses the Ten commandments, delivered them amid earthquake, fire and wind. Surely God would meet him there!

When he got to the top of the mountain, God asked him: “Elijah, why are you here?” Elijah answered, “I’ve been zealous for the Lord, yet the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, ruined your altars, killed your prophets, I alone am left, and now they seek my life.”

God said, “Go, stand on the mountain before the Lord.” Now comes one of the holy moments of sacred history, we take off our shoes. In the stark simplicity of the Hebrew language, here is what happened:

And there was a might wind

Not in the wind was Yahweh

And after the wind an earthquake

Not in the earthquake was Yahweh

And after the earthquake, fire

Yahweh was not in the fire.

And after the fire

The sound of crushed silence

We remember the last words this way:

And after the fire, a still small voice.

It has become almost a spiritual cliché. It does not convey the terrible starkness of the moment. Three words: *voice, silence, crushed*. The sound of crushed silence.

Elijah had come for God to act as God had acted in Israel's history. There was the wind, like the wind that blew back the waters of the Red Sea and let the Hebrew people escape to freedom. But God was not in the wind. There was the earthquake, like the earthquake that shook this very mountain when God delivered to Moses the Ten Commandments. But God was not in the earthquake. There was the fire, like the fire God sent to consume Elijah's sacrifice on Mt. Carmel. But God was not in the fire.

Then the silence, nothing—what the text calls “the sound of crushed silence” because they were the best words could do.

But the Holy One was there in the silence; and Elijah in true reverence covered his face with his robe.

There are times when we run out of spirit, or the spirit runs out of us. When God is nowhere to be found. St. John of the Cross, the Spanish mystic called it “the dark night of the soul”. You go into a giant cavern underground. The guide turns off his light. There is a dark so thick you could taste it. It’s like that.

Worship seems dry as dust. The old hymns don’t move you any more, your prayers seem to rise no higher than the ceiling. You are walking through the dark.

We don’t give up, we go on. God is there in the dark too, in the silence of no action, and with nothing to be felt. We follow Elijah. We wrap our faces with our cloaks. We kneel and wait. There is hope in the waiting. The Hebrew word for hope is *wait*. How often do the Psalms say “Wait for the Lord”? You don’t wait for what is already there.

This is not the time to fill the silence with words, to cover our despair with busyness. It is time to be still and silent and learn what the dark has to tell us. There are the things we learn in the dark we could never learn in the light.

This is a transitional time, what some call a “liminal space” a threshold, as from one room to another. It is a sacred in-between time. We may feel God as an absence, but God is inviting us to come near in new ways of coming near.



In a time of crushed silence we are not to curse the darkness, or flee it, but to embrace it, for God waits for us there.

Amen

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1. Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1979), 9.