

Two Sermons on Elijah the Tishbite
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The Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7)

June 20, 2004

Text: I Kings 19:1-15a

The translation we heard today, from the nineteenth chapter of First Kings (from the NRSV) says that out in the wilderness Elijah heard “a sound of sheer silence.” That’s a pretty accurate translation of the Hebrew oxymoron: sounds of silence, or silence that can be heard. Many of us are perhaps more familiar with the King James Version (retained by the RSV), which says Elijah heard “a still, small voice.” While perhaps a part of our consciousness (and to my ear quite poetic) the truth is that “a sound of sheer silence” is the better English translation.

In any case, the conventional approach to this text is to invite us to contemplation. I’ve both heard and preached that sermon many times: as a call to get away from it all, to slow down and find a quiet place where we can hear God. And it’s a pretty good one—quite frankly, and a valid one for busy suburbanites on the verge of summer vacations. But it’s not the sermon I want to preach today.

Instead, since I suspect that few here would consider themselves experts in the Book of Kings, I want to take a wider lens approach to this story—and back up to ask how Elijah came to be there in that cave, out in the wilderness of Mount Horeb—and then to see if there might be in the telling of that larger story another word addressed to us.

If I asked you to tell me all you know about David, I suspect there would be some consistent images that would emerge for us pretty quickly.

- David the shepherd boy, out keeping watch on the flock when Samuel comes to Jesse’s house in search of a king.
- David the brave boy-soldier, who took his slingshot and killed the Philistine, Goliath with nothing more than courage and trust in the Lord.
- David the musician—playing his harp, singing the psalms.
- David the wise king, who brought the ark to Jerusalem and made it the capitol.
- And yes, even David the flawed human being, who on at least one occasion let unchecked power corrupt him—as when he fell for Bathsheba and didn’t let the little problem of her marriage stand in his way. He did it because he could...

But when the curtain opens on the story of First Kings, we see another David—one I suspect we tend to repress from our memories. The narrator tells us that he is now “old, and advanced in years, and although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm.”

That little verse speaks volumes. I can remember delivering newspapers to my great-grandparents house, which always seemed to be kept (no matter what time of the year it was) at about 85 degrees. Whenever I visit with parishioners in Nursing Homes I am reminded of how circulation can leave

older people feeling cold, and in need of a blanket or a prayer shawl—even as I’m trying to drink plenty of fluids to replace what I’m losing.

The image of David as First Kings opens is akin to the public mourning our nation has just gone through. We saw again images of one of our strongest presidents—the one who stood up and told the leader of the Soviet Union to tear down the Berlin Wall—juxtaposed with images we did not see as publicly but anyone who has known the terrible nature of Alzheimer’s disease could imagine, of a man slowly taken, inch by inch, from his family and friends and nation. That is King David in the opening scene of First Kings: we see before us an old man who can no longer seem to get warm, a man near death—and yet even in beholding that image all of the others are brought to mind—these snapshots of his life as beloved king.

The big difference, however, between the death of a king and the death of a former president is that the death of a king causes a political crisis—especially when the line of succession isn’t clear. David, remember, had several wives and numerous sons. Two of them: Adonijah (son of Haggith) and Solomon (son of Bathsheba) both have followings. And each has a claim to the throne. There is no such thing as a “job share,” though, for kings. So by the end of chapter two of First Kings: David is dead, and so too is Adonijah, and Solomon is now the king.

It seems that Solomon had a pretty good press secretary. The narrator in First Kings acknowledges that God gave Solomon “wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and largeness of mind like the sand on the seashore.” (4:29) He gets credit for building of the temple and a new palace, not to mention most of the Book of Proverbs.

But those building projects come with a price. Reading through those chapters of Kings (from about the third to the tenth), we get a sense if we know how to read between the lines that there is a cost to all this luxury. You start to read about the cedars from Lebanon, and the pillars of bronze, and the costly stones, and the pure gold and you find yourself asking, “who paid for all this?” The answer is that taxes were raised, and also Solomon “raised a levy of forced labor.” That’s a euphemism for slavery.

Remember that when Israel first wanted to have a king, they “wanted to be like all the other nations.” Samuel didn’t think that was a good idea—the whole point was for Israel to be different from all the other nations: to have Yahweh alone as their king. Nevertheless, they finally prevailed and got first Saul, and then David, and now Solomon. Among Solomon’s many wives is the daughter of Pharaoh, whom he marries for political reasons. It seems, in other words, that Israel has finally achieved its stated desire: it really is like all the other nations.

Whenever the privileged ruling class overreaches, the poor always pay the biggest price. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. That in a nutshell is the story of what happened during Solomon’s reign. Irony of ironies: less than five hundred years after God acted to liberate the people from slavery in Egypt, the Pharaoh is King Solomon’s father-in-law, and the king is enslaving his own people. By the time we get to the eleventh chapter of Kings the narrator stops being subtle: blurting out that Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (many of them foreign) and as a result he turned his heart to other gods. “So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not wholly follow the Lord, as David his father had done.” (11:6)

Just eleven chapters into First Kings, we've seen the death of David, the corruption of Solomon, and then the death of Solomon. The whole kingdom is about to come unglued. God stands in the books of Kings as in the rest of the Bible, not with the powerful, but with the victims of corrupting power. God stands in solidarity with those who pay the greatest price in hard times. And God confronts the powerful by raising up prophets to demand that they change their ways.

It is into this political and economic context, with King Ahab now on the throne, that "a man of God" named Elijah the Tishbite steps onto the scene. He confronts Ahab and his wife, Jezebel by challenging the royal prophets to a contest at Mount Carmel. He declares himself a servant of the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (18:36) That's where we picked up the story today—just after Elijah has humiliated the king's prophets. Ahab tells Jezebel what has happened, and they put out a contract out on Elijah's life. "*Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life.*" In plain English, he ran away—as fast as he could run.

He runs, interestingly enough, to the very place where God's people first encountered this living God—to Mount Sinai. (Here it's called, as it sometimes is in the Bible, Mount Horeb—but it's the same place.) It's interesting to notice that there is this beautiful temple in Jerusalem with all that gold and cedar and the rest—but it seems that God isn't interested in hanging out there if the cost is that God's people are enslaved, and economic injustice prevails. God follows Elijah to Sinai—into the desert where Torah was first given as a gift to this people—with the intent of making them *different* from all the other nations.

And so Elijah spends forty days there. Sound familiar? That's how long Moses was there as well. (Exodus 34:28) It's also, of course, the length of time Jesus would one day spend in the wilderness as well, after his baptism by John. So, too, the cave is reminiscent of the "cleft in the rock" where Moses stood as the Lord passed by.

During that time, Elijah is confronted with his own fear—and by God. "What are you doing here, Elijah," God asks? Elijah responds a bit too defensively: "I'm here because I'm very zealous for the Lord, Lord. Everybody else has forsaken your covenant, and thrown down your altars...I'm the only one left...but I think my days are numbered."

The first time around at Sinai, God was in the midst of fire and thunder and lightening and all kinds of other pyrotechnics. Here we get that, too, but this time God isn't in all that. God is now heard "in the sound of sheer silence." What the voice says afterwards, however, is clear in any language: "Go."

Now when you put it back into that context you can see that at least in this text, it is not contemplation to which Elijah is called—not even to rest—but rather he is *sent* back into the dangerous world to do the work of ministry. *Go, Elijah!* Elijah is challenged by God to face his fears—and to overcome them—in order to "do the work that God has given him to do." He is called to move out of the "comfort zone" of that cave in order to speak truth to power, as a person who speaks again on behalf of the poor and vulnerable in a world that doesn't want to hear it. He is called to *action*—on behalf of the God who demands justice.

Now I don't for a second want anyone here to hear me saying that the Bible means for us to be "energizer bunnies" for Jesus. We do indeed need rest—holy Sabbath—built into our daily routines, our weekly routines, and especially into time away from it all. Without guilt! But even so, we aren't

called to Sabbath as an end in itself, or to navel-gazing. We keep Sabbath because it is in those times of silence that we stand the best chance of hearing God speak our names and calling us to ministry. Baptism calls us to be servants of Jesus Christ. Out of sounds of sheer silence we may yet hear a Word spoken to us:

You are my witnesses. I need you in this world. So get over your fears, and go! Don't worry, I'll be with you. Now go!

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8)

June 27, 2004

Text: I Kings 9:15-16, 19-21

Last weekend I preached on the first fifteen verses of the nineteenth chapter of First Kings. Today that story continues. But before we continue, I want to briefly re-cap what I tried to say last weekend...and give the “Cliff Notes” version, if you will.

Elijah looms large in the Old Testament narrative, and is probably second only to Moses in his significance. He represents the prophetic voice—the religious calling to speak truth to power—a voice that calls God’s people back to the covenant made at Sinai. At the heart of that calling is for God’s people to be *different* from all the other nations (and not the same)—to be as Isaiah will put it centuries later, “a light to the nations.”

Last week we left Elijah at Mount Sinai (although it’s confusing because the narrator in Kings calls it Mount Horeb.) He had fled there feeling afraid and alone—as if he were the only one left in all of Israel who cared about serving God. Out of the “sound of sheer silence” that followed thunder and lightening and earthquake, he heard the word of the Lord addressing him in a new way—a line we heard repeated in today’s reading. “Go...go back into the world to bear witness to me. Do not be afraid, for I will be with you.”

Elijah had felt that he alone was left, that he alone was trying to serve the Lord. But he is at least in part to blame for feeling that way because he has isolated himself from others. He’s fled into the wilderness, into that cave—and then convinced himself that he alone cares about serving God.

God’s response is to send him back into the world. But first he sends him to find Elisha, who will share in this work with him for a while, and eventually take over for him. He is, in other words, put into contact with others. To me that’s a very important point we must not miss. God puts us in community—into a Body, so that we are not alone.

I worry when I hear people—ordained or lay—complaining that no one else wants to do anything, that “they alone are left.” It’s a sure sign of burnout. More often than not I’ve found that the person who sees no one else to help is not looking in the right places. They have developed tunnel vision—which can be corrected by learning to look peripherally. God sends Elijah out to find someone with whom to share the load. He’ll never do that if he stays in that cave at Mount Horeb! But if he goes, with eyes that see, God will raise up others to share the work...

That is as I read it what today's text is about. The call of Elisha is a sign of hope... a sign that ministry is shared. There's a great danger people of faith face in every generation of a kind of paternalism (or maternalism!) where we only want people to "help us out" in ministry but they must do it exactly as we specify. We don't allow them their own authority. We literally want "helpers" rather than "partners." If we see ministry in that way we will certainly end up alone, and feeling like no one else cares about serving the Lord.

By telling Elijah to "go"—Yahweh reminds him that ministry does matter. (Especially in the dangerous context in which he lives.) But it's not "Lone Ranger" work. God opens Elijah's eyes to discover people like Elisha—who are more than ready to sign on for this work if they are simply asked.

This scene with Elisha also signifies the cost of discipleship. Notice that Elijah doesn't minimize this work. He doesn't say, "aw, it's nothing really, a piece of cake"—just a couple of hours a week. In fact, Elisha literally burns his bridges when he says yes to Elijah—just as those fishermen in the Gospels do when Jesus asks them to fish for people. He slaughters his oxen, and boils their flesh, and uses it to feed people. In other words, he will not be going back to his old life. He lets go of the past, in order to wholeheartedly embrace this new calling—even though it doesn't yet know all that it will entail. Elijah's mantle is akin to Moses' staff. It represents his divine authority. By throwing his mantle over Elisha, Elijah is in a sense "ordaining him"—he's offering him a symbol of his own prophetic authority and of divine favor.

On a very practical level, there is a lesson here for us as a parish and for the wider church. All ministry is about raising up leaders—about keeping our eyes open for people who can take over for us when we are ready to move to new challenges. No ministry should ever be thought of as a lifetime tenure—nor as identified with solely one person. That goes for rectors, wardens, and for every single ministry in this congregation. I'm convinced that healthy congregations grasp this, and work as hard at finding successors as they do in doing the work itself, so that the ministry isn't about them, but about the work God gives us to do as a community.

Elijah's ascension—a few chapters beyond where we stopped reading today, on that "chariot of fire"—puts him in the same category as Moses. His life comes to a mystical end. You will remember that many centuries later, when Jesus is transfigured, it is these two—Moses and Elijah—who appear at his side. Elijah is connected with the fulfillment of human history—with the messianic age when justice is done, and there is peace on earth. If you've ever been to a Passover Seder you know that a place is set for Elijah, and a cup of wine is poured. "Next year in Jerusalem," perhaps Elijah will come and join the Seder—and bring with him those signs of the messianic age.

As such, he is a symbol of hope—hope that God's tomorrow is brighter than all of our yesterdays. Hope that even in the midst of difficult days—God's people trust that God's will may yet be done on earth as it is in heaven. He therefore plays a prominent role in the New Testament, even if we Christians too often miss the point. Both John the Baptist and Jesus are each in turn identified with Elijah. They remind others of Elijah, because I think, they each in their own way inspire hope. They inspire a sense that God is at work again, that God is in charge, that the world is being put right.

If we want to more deeply understand who Jesus was, and who John the Baptist was, then it is incumbent upon us as Christians to go back and re-read these stories from First and Second Kings.

“*Who* do people say that Jesus is?” Some say Elijah. *Why* do they say that? What about him recalls this great figure? As Christians we need to know the Old Testament as well as we know the New Testament, because the New Testament makes little sense without the Old.

As Christians there is for us more than the Gospels, more even than the New Testament. We are rediscovering the Old Testament in our generation because it gives us the language to share the good news. We are learning again that it is simply not accurate to suggest that the God of the Old Testament is a God of judgment while the God revealed in the New Testament through Jesus is a God of mercy—as if they were separate gods. *We believe in One God*—and the Church insists that the God who created the heavens and the earth *is* the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

These texts we’ve looked at these past two weeks, and in fact the entire narrative of First and Second Kings, remind us that we, like Elijah and Elisha are called to ministry—that we are commissioned by virtue of our baptism to share in proclaiming this same covenant of God’s love. The work that Elijah began continues in every generation.

The details may be different. But it’s no excuse to say that times are tough or that life is hard. Life has always been hard for God’s people, and there are always costs to discipleship. No one should pretend that the work of ministry is easy, or that it should be.

For us—whatever our work is—whether as farmers, fishermen, bankers, business people, nurses—we are probably not called to leave it all behind to become missionaries or go off to seminary. Some may. But that’s not the bridge-burning most of us are called to. Rather, our primary work as baptized persons is as citizens of the kingdom of God—to be sent back into the world carrying with us an alternative vision of what is yet possible. To be people who do hope for, and pray for, and work towards “peace on earth and good will to all.”

We come to church, I think, to be reminded of that vision—and to be reminded of who we are as beloved people of God—so that we can carry that back into the world and practice it in our daily lives. As we find ways to integrate our faith with our daily lives—the honest truth is that it will not always fit. There will be moments—maybe only one or two big moments over a lifetime, or maybe many tiny little moments week after week—where the values we speak of in this place on Sunday morning begin to break into what we do from Monday to Friday in ways that are not comfortable or easy.

We’re all called in Baptism for example to “respect the dignity of every human being” and “to work for justice and peace among all people.” Those are non-negotiable—they are at the very heart of our Baptismal Covenant as they are at the heart of the covenant made at Sinai. The Ahabs and the Jezebels of this world want us to forget that calling, but Elijah’s role is to keep calling us back to it.

The soldier who first shared pictures of what was happening in Iraqi prisons was a Christian. He said he was torn between his responsibilities as a soldier and his responsibilities as a Christian. But in the end he felt he had to speak the truth. In the end party politics and even national allegiances, had to be secondary to the claim that Jesus is Lord.

You can supply your own challenges, from your own lives, far better than I can. They may be far less dramatic. But that doesn’t make them any less important. We don’t have to go looking for them—if we are learning to follow Christ challenges will find us, to be sure. In the meantime,

“what kind of people are we becoming here at St. Francis? Do we live in fear of repercussions, or are we learning how to live more and more faithfully as bold witnesses for the gospel?” The kind of faith I hope we are cultivating helps us to take risks, to become more active Christians rather than passive ones.

Sometimes I think the worst challenge to faith is when we begin to think we can't make a difference. That's Elijah last week—back in that cave. If we believe we are alone, we stop trying. But God puts us with other Christians—reminds us we are part of a Body—so that we don't have to do it all, but we are needed to do our part. Go—God says again to every generation. Go to love and serve the Lord, as you organize your life and your values more and more around the Baptismal Covenant. Two things will inevitably happen to us, as they did to Elijah: we will encounter God, and we will find others along the way in the journey to share the work. And as those two things happen to us, we will (I believe) discover and rediscover that we have far more power and authority than we imagined, as God works through us, in this time, and this place.