

## “The Story”

We get the notion sometimes that the Bible is totally unlike any other book we know. I suppose there’s a sense in which that’s true—but only in function. The Bible is unique only in the sense that it occupies a singular place at the center of our faith tradition. But in another sense what makes the Bible so special is how ordinary it is: how it captures and reflects universal human inclinations and experiences. When we focus exclusively on the uniqueness of the Bible we can miss the ways in which it is telling *our* life story.

Most of us have been where we find Elijah today. I don’t mean the wilderness of Sinai; I mean the desert of dead ends. We know what it is to be at or near the end of our rope. Maybe we have found ourselves there due to the loss of a spouse through death or divorce; or through the loss of a job; or the loss of an ability or resource. Maybe we are grieving the loss of a loved one, perhaps somebody for whom we have been a caregiver for a long time, on whom we have centered our lives. Maybe there’s been a painful transition: a move to a strange place, becoming empty-nesters, moving into retirement and wondering who we are. But we’ve all, at times, found ourselves feeling empty and lost—sometimes even in the immediate aftermath of a great triumph of some sort.

One of my own such moments found me sitting in my 1966 VW Beetle with all my worldly possessions. I was separated from my wife. I had been living with friends who couldn’t put me up any more. And I had no clue what my next move might be. When we’re not sure where to turn, where to go or what to do, we’re having an Elijah moment.

Elijah is on the run following a great confrontation. His story is the story of the struggle for the hearts and lives of the people of Israel. Will they be faithful to the worship of their distinctive God, YAHWEH? Or will they go along to get along and join in the worship of the fertility god Baal? To highlight the choice, Elijah has declared a drought that Baal has been powerless to break. As crops languish and the economy declines there is a showdown between Elijah, the solitary prophet of YAHWEH and four-hundred-fifty priests of Baal on the top of Mount Carmel.

The Baal worshippers have a royal patron in the person of Queen Jezebel, a Phoenician princess from Sidon who is the wife of Israel’s King Ahab. Jezebel brought the worship of Baal right into the courts and palaces of Israel. To Elijah this is utterly intolerable. Elijah’s name means “YAHWEH is God.” And to him “no other gods” means precisely that: “no other gods.”

So on Mount Carmel animals are slaughtered and wood is stacked for a great sacrifice. The priests of Baal try first to get their god to bring fire to consume the offering. They fail. Then Elijah dramatically pours water over the whole thing and then calls down fire from YAHWEH which consumes the wood and the sacrifice in an instant. Elijah calls on the crowd to slaughter the priests of Baal, which they do. It is a great triumph for Elijah.

But when Queen Jezebel hears of it, she is furious. She pledges a solemn oath by her gods to do to Elijah as he has done to her priests. Terrified, Elijah runs for his life... and his flight is impressive. From Mount Carmel in the north he flees the length of Israel, far beyond the jurisdiction of Ahab and Jezebel. He comes to Beer-Sheba, the traditional southern boundary of the Promised Land. There he leaves his servant behind. Then, alone, he continues into the desert. He is utterly without resources: no visible means of support.

When we read this story carefully and attend to its details a clear pattern emerges. What Elijah ends up doing is reliving the exodus from Egypt. His solitary flight follows the story of his people, with the result that his life is transformed.

Following a great triumph—not unlike the crossing of the Red Sea—Elijah is left to ask the question, “What does God do for an encore?” He finds himself alone in a place that cannot support life. He is utterly dependent, sitting under a solitary broom tree. Imagine him sitting in the only patch of shade for miles and miles: great mental image. Despondent, he cries to God: “It is enough now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” This is the cry of every zealous reformer, isn’t it? What happened to the movement? I poured heart and soul into this, but Jezebel and Baal are more powerful than ever. I have made no difference at all against the entrenched special interests. I am ready to die.

He falls asleep. He is awakened by an angel (literally a “messenger”) who nudges him and says, “Get up and eat.” And there sitting on hot stones is a cake, and beside it a jar of water. Like his ancestors, in the lifeless desert he receives bread from heaven and water from the rocks of the wilderness. He’s still exhausted and falls asleep again. Again comes the messenger with another meal and the instruction: “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” The journey? What journey? Never mind: just eat.

Fortified by the food and rest, Elijah keeps heading south, for forty days and forty nights—symbolically the length of time the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness. He arrives at Mount Horeb. This means little to us until we realize that Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai. Elijah has made the journey through the wilderness to the very place where Moses met God on the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. He has returned to the place where his people were transformed from a procession of fugitive slaves into a nation before God.

There on Mount Sinai he finds a cave. Remember that Moses hid himself in the cleft of a rock so he would be protected from the majesty of God: “Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.”<sup>1</sup> Elijah is not just hiding out. He is expecting something.

The word of the LORD comes to him in the form of a question familiar to all of us: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” What am I doing here? How did I get here? How did it come to this? And Elijah responds as most of us do: he begins to rehearse his story, complete with rhetorical embellishment and violin accompaniment. “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.” That last bit is clearly overstated, but it’s surely how Elijah feels: I am all alone and this is hopeless.

The voice tells him to go to the mouth of the cave. And there he witnesses three (a good biblical number) natural phenomena often associated with deities: a great wind, an earthquake and fire. These pyrotechnics accompanied Moses’ visits to Sinai; and they are certainly identified with Baal, as well. But this time YAHWEH is not in them. Following the bombast is what the King James Version of the Bible rendered as a “still, small voice.” But the NRSV may be closer to the sense of it: “a sound of sheer silence.” It is an absence in which is felt a presence. It is an experience of sheer awe. Elijah knows he is in the presence of God.

And so he veils his face, as Moses had to veil his face when speaking with God. He moves again to the mouth of the cave and they start over: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” “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.”

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<sup>1</sup> That great old hymn, of course, portrays Jesus as the rock to which we flee.

This is a dangerous way to read scripture, but what strikes me about the next part is what it does not contain. There is no gentle pat on the hand with the reassurance, “There, there. It must be terribly difficult for you.” There is no gentle chiding: “O come now, Elijah! Surely you are exaggerating! It’s not all that bad now, is it?” Just as Moses never gets an answer when he asks what God’s name is, God does not respond to Elijah’s characterization of his circumstances. God simply tells Elijah what comes next. For Moses it was, “Go to the Pharaoh.” For Elijah it is, “Appoint your successor.” For both of them it amounts to, “Get back in there.”

There is a bigger story going on here, and Elijah has a continuing role in it, but that role is changing. There will be new kings in Aram and in Israel—kings of God’s choosing. And Elisha, whose name means, “God saves” will begin to apprentice himself to Elijah. There is to be a whole new chapter to the story. Elijah goes on his way to perform his appointed tasks. Like Moses before him, Elijah will never see the full realization of his work. That’s just the way it will be.

This story fascinates me: how Elijah in a time of great duress finds himself reliving the story of his people. In this he finds sustenance—strength for the journey. And he comes to remember who he is and who God is. He rediscovers that his story is part of a greater story; and it is in that greater story that he finds renewed meaning and purpose.

Returning to the story of who you are doesn’t make your circumstances change miraculously. It doesn’t mean that you can avoid the pain of loss or grief, fear or loneliness. There are no quick and easy answers that short-circuit the process.

But what is sustaining to Elijah and to us is the reassurance that, wherever we are, there is life at the end of it. This is the difference between having a toothache and being a toothache. We return to the story to remember that there is something bigger of which we are a part. I remember saying to a counselor one time, “Just tell me that I won’t hurt like this forever. Tell me that some day this will feel different.” We need to believe that there is a new chapter waiting to find us: something we can’t fully predict or envision.

In the meantime it helps to revisit the stories that tell us who we are: the story of the God who calls slaves to freedom and nationhood; the story of prophets and apostles whom God calls, empowers and sustains; the story of Jesus Christ who reveals God’s deathless love for us and reminds us that out of our dead ends come God’s new beginnings. The story grounds us. When we get to rock bottom, it is the rock on which we stand.

Community helps. We need to hear and tell the story. We need to be reminded. A caring presence like a Stephen Minister can help tremendously: listening and understanding, embodying the presence of a caring community, helping us find our way to the new and deeper meaning in our circumstances.

We need to remember and to trust that there is sustenance for the journey, even before we know where that journey will take us. Sometimes all we can do is eat and rest, eat and rest, receive the nourishment and care that come to us. Attending angels have been known to come in all shapes and sizes... we never really know where help will come from. But it’s there in the midst of the desert.

Most of all, I suppose, we need to be prepared to be surprised, if such a thing is possible: to be *prepared* to be surprised. Elijah doesn’t find God in the clichés: earthquake, wind and fire. He finds God in the experience of awe, in the sound of sheer silence. We need to learn to seek God in the awe of beauty, in the quiet beyond the tumult; and when we have that experience of awe, to receive it in expectant reverence: to move to the mouth of the cave with a veil on.

For somewhere where our story intersects with *the* story, a new chapter is waiting—a new role, perhaps; a new way to serve, a new form of purpose and usefulness.

This story of God's people is our story. Thanks be to God.

Amen

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