

SERMON – ELIJAH 1 Kings 18 and 19

Children's Stories – telling Carolyn that I was probably going to stop soon because I was running out of stories. “Really? In the whole Bible?” Well, of course, more stories in the Bible – but once we leave the stories of Jesus it is a little harder to find ones that make for good children's stories. Either they cannot be easily explained to children or they contain a lot of behavior we spend our lives teaching our children NOT to do. Today's story about Elijah would be case in point. It is the next scripture for preaching from the lectionary Pastor Dave is using and so it is our adult story for today.

Story

- We begin in I Kings 18.
- Famine in Samaria caused by heresy of the people.
- God – “Go present yourself to King Ahab and I will send rain.”
- Not as simple as it sounds. King Ahab was an evil guy – I Kings 16 – “Did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any King of Israel before him”
- Ahab married Jezebel – which just exponentiated the evil because Jezebel insisted that the nature gods from her homeland be promoted in Samaria. Temples were built and confusion and division among the Israelites ensued – who should we worship
- Baal or Yahweh? It was a real problem and many solved it by trying to placate both – worship them both.
- *Problem for two reasons:*
 - *First - Baal not the true God. Why Baal? Powerful. Storms and rain. You'd want that god on your side.... if things weren't going well you would REALLY want it. We would like to have a God who fixes things. But even though...Yahweh is not in the business of fixing things that we mess up.*
 - *Second -. Thing of not taking a stand but instead placating all sides is destructive. In fairness... Israelites were in danger if they professed loyalty to Yahweh. So I get it, but it's not right.*
 - *There is a new Texas law that requires teachers to present multiple perspectives when discussing “widely debated and currently controversial” issues. A school official translating what this means to a teachers group told them that if they have a book on the holocaust in their classroom, they need to have a book representing the alternative view on the Holocaust.*
 - *There are not multiple, right perspectives on the Holocaust. It happened. There are not multiple right perspectives on whether or not racism has existed in the structures of American society. It has. There are not multiple legitimate perspectives on whether climate change is caused in large part by human behavior. It is.*

- *As followers of Jesus we simply cannot placate all sides. Hate must be called out for what it is and lies for what they are. The greater good and watching out for the vulnerable - not personal liberty above all else -- is our calling. And we must be stewards of the creation even when it is inconvenient and may cause some industries to cease. We must stand up for the God we know and for the teachings of the Jesus we follow. Period.*
- Prophets of God were, indeed, trying to do this. They were trying to talk sense into people. Given this, Jezebel had almost all of them slaughtered. The only ones left were 100 that had been hidden by an insider in the palace who was trying to be part of the administration but still do the right thing.

Obadiah

- Palace Administrator who had hidden those prophets was Obadiah. Reports directly to the King but he is faithful to the Hebrew God and risked his life saving these prophets.
- Wandering around Samaria looking for water for the animals, per Ahab's request.
- Runs into Elijah. I want you to tell Ahab I am looking to speak to him.
- Crazy! If I tell him and then you don't show up, I'm dead. What is the deal here? I hid the prophets. I'm a good guy. Now you are setting me up to die??
- Elijah – "I promise"
- Sure enough, Elijah does show up and meet with Ahab. He tells Ahab to summon all the people to meet me on Mount Carmel. Bring 850 of Jezebel's prophets along.

Showdown

- People gather. Elijah confronts them – how long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him. If Baal is God, follow him. Stop the waffling and stand up for something. Grow a back bone. People say nothing in response.
- Instructs the people – find two bulls and cut them up to be sacrificed. We will put one on the altar of the Baal's prophets and one on mine. You should prepare them but don't light a fire. We will pray. And if the gods of Jezebel are real, the fire will be set on that altar. And if Yahweh is real, the fire will be set there. We will determine the real God to be worshipped this way.
- Prophets of Baal pray, yell, dance around. No response. Elijah, doing the opposite of what we teach children, taunts them, makes fun of them., bullies them. They continue even harder into the evening. Still no response.
- Elijah now builds the altar to God. For good measure, he digs a trench around it and gets the people to drench the bull and the altar with water – so much water that it fills the deep trench.
- ³⁶ At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in

Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. ³⁷ Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”

- ³⁸ Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.
- ³⁹ When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!”
- Grab all the prophets of Baal. They grab them all and Elijah has them all slaughtered. (You see what I mean about the children’s story...)

Chapter 19 – Runs away

- When Ahab gets back to Jezreel, he tells his wife everything, including all her prophets are dead. Jezebel is furious. She sends a message to Elijah – I am going to kill you too.
- Elijah panics and runs for his life.
 - *Don't mean to throw shade on one of God's prophets – but after all that just happened on that mountain – does he really think God is going to let Jezebel kill him?? After all that, would you run away, assuming God won't save you???*
 - *Yeah, you would. So would I. We have short memories for the good things. Faith is strengthened by a great experience, or a prayer answered... and then later, sometimes only weeks later, we find ourselves struggling again.*
- The Bible says he goes into the wilderness of Beersheba, lays down under a bush and asks to die. Now the fact that he is in the wilderness of Beersheba to start with is a passive suicide attempt. No one can live out there for long.
- Elijah says “I have had enough, LORD,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.”...He considers himself a failure just like his prophetic ancestors – they have all lacked success in encouraging the Israelites to be faithful
 - *We have a hard time with small progress. We want the big win, the extraordinary success -- and we get so focused on that, that we don't see and don't value the day-to-day victories. Elijah was successful. There were faithful Israelites. But today, in this moment, he sees none of that. When discouragement takes hold, it causes us to be blind to that which could be encouraging.*
- Well, God is having none of this pity party stuff. God sends food and water not once but twice and eventually Elijah feels stronger and continues on to Mount Sinai. He is actually not in better spirits but his body is strong and so he walks.
 - *We are loved by a God who does not require much from us. God has made a covenant with us that is not dependent on us, but rather on God.*
 - *As parents we understand this – no matter what your child ever does, no matter who your child chooses to become, YOU, the person who loved them from the first, stand steadfast and loving. So it is with Elijah and God.*

- *The world can hate him – or so it feels to him – but God is still there caring for him even when Elijah doesn't make that easy. **We may lose ourselves in the wilderness but God never loses us.** God sees Elijah for who he really is, not what he has accomplished or not accomplished in a given moment.*

God Comes

- So renewed in body, Elijah walks the long way to Mount Sinai.
- The fact that the story takes Elijah to Mt. Sinai is a signal for the listener of this story that God is about to do something big. Like in a movie when the music sounds a certain way, you get to the edge of your seat and pay close attention.
- Elijah goes into a cave once in there he hears a voice. “What are you doing here Elijah?”
- Now mind you, the voice is not asking him “Why did you come to Mount Sinai?” The question – “What are you doing HERE when your work is over THERE?”
- I have been very zealous for the Lord God and only bad things have happened. The people turned away from God, all of the other prophets of God were killed, I am the only one left and they are going to kill me, too.
- Sensing he needs reassurance, the voice tells Elijah to go out and stand on the mountain. The Lord is about to pass by.
- Powerful wind. Tore the mountains apart and shattered rocks. God not there.
- Earthquake. God not there.
- Fire. God not there.
- “After the fire, came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face ...
 - *God speaks in the quiet. Quiet. And it is so important that we try to stop long enough to listen. Because at some level all we really need to hear the whisper that says we are not alone in this world, we are not alone in our struggles.*
- So there is Elijah, cloak over his face because he knows he has heard God. Voice asks again, “What are you doing here, Elijah.”
- He repeats what he said earlier.... I have been very zealous for the Lord and only bad things have happened, yadada...ugh...
- Realizing that Elijah may have spent all he had and just needs concrete help, the voice tell him -- Go back to Damascus. Anoint Hazael as King and Jehu as King. Between the two of them they will kill off the rest of the Baal worshippers. The find Elisha and anoint him as the prophet to succeed you. With these detailed instructions and essentially a retirement plan, Elijah leaves Mt Sinai and begins to do as instructed.

So what do we find as the teaching from this story.

- 1. Nothing good comes out of trying to placate both sides. We have to pick – is it justice and truth, or not. It is Yahweh or Baal. We may lose friends.***

Our denomination may divide. Regardless, we must stand up for the God we know and for the teachings of the Jesus we follow.

- 2. Hanging on to our faith is not easy to do, even if you are a prophet. We get strengthened and weakened, strengthened and weakened...because there are so many discouraging things going on around us. It get wearying to watch it all. The good news is that the only thing affected by our weakening faith is our optimism. God is with us whether we believe it or not. God will, in the end, win, whether we believe it or not. We may lose ourselves in the wilderness, but God never loses us.***

- 3. God's cause has a future that is not dependent on us. We will eventually fade away, and that's OK. There is a natural cycle to our lives, to our energy, to our ability to keep fighting the good fight. This is true for most of us as individuals and it's true for most congregations. God's cause does not require that we exist. God's cause has never been entirely dependent on us. God was at work before we came onto the scene and God will continue to be at work after we leave.***

And for today – that is the good news.