

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

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1 Kings 19-22

"Fear and Faith"

The worst king of Israel, Ahab, has met the greatest of the prophets, Elijah, in the great "contest of the gods" on Mt. Carmel – and YHWH the LORD, the God of Israel has sent down fire to consume Elijah's sacrifice; whereas the prophets of Baal have been unable to rouse their "god" to any action. Ahab is humbled, Elijah has "the power of the LORD" on him. But what will happen now? Will Ahab turn from idolatry and lead all Israel to worship their true God? Will Elijah now become the "leading prophet" of the land, whom the king and the people follow?

1) *Elijah Fears Jezebel*

If you know anything of the characters involved in this story, you know who stands in the way of a revival of true faith in Israel – Jezebel the queen! As soon as Ahab returns to tell her what happened on Mt. Carmel, she sets out with an oath to kill Elijah. She knows she can stop this "revival" of YHWH-worship in its tracks!

So Elijah flees for his life. We next meet him 100 miles away, down in Beersheba in Judah, on the edge of the Negev, exhausted and in despair. He lies down beneath a scrub tree and prays for the LORD to take his life. "I have had enough, LORD," he cries. "I am doing no better than anyone before me in turning your people back to you... Let me die." But the LORD is not finished with

Elijah, and has much yet to teach him, and many ways yet to use him. What Elijah needs now is rest and renewal and recommissioning.

So an angel brings him food and water, and after more rest, Elijah is strengthened for a long journey – maybe 200 miles – down into Sinai, to "the mountain of the LORD," Mt. Horeb or Mt. Sinai. "Why are you here, Elijah?" asks the LORD – as though he doesn't know! "I have been very zealous for you, LORD... your people have gone into idolatry and I have striven to make them return and they have killed all your prophets and I am the only one left and they are trying to kill me too..." Poor Elijah! He is worn out being "zealous for the LORD," and he himself needs a new encounter with the LORD if he is not going to drown in despair and self-pity and exhaustion.

So the gracious LORD says he will give Elijah a fresh vision of himself, there in the place where he first made a covenant with Moses and Israel. Like Moses, Elijah "cannot see the face of the LORD and live," but the LORD is gentle and teaches Elijah something he had not grasped before – that the LORD is not only found in the fire and the wind and the earth moving beneath his feet, but also in "a gentle whisper" – what the old translations here call *a still small voice*. Now Elijah is ready to be sent back, "the way he came," to his ministry in Israel with

instructions on people to anoint – new kings for Syria and Israel, and a new prophet – *Elisha* – as his own apprentice and successor.

2) *Ahab Fears Jezebel*

Meanwhile back in Samaria, Ahab has two problems: one is Jezebel, whom he fears as much as Elijah does; the other is the king of Syria, Ben-Hadad, who is attacking from the north. Ahab is a weak man, always most influenced by the last person he spoke to. His first reaction to the Syrians is to offer surrender. When Ben-Hadad demands too much, even Ahab's advisors (and no doubt Jezebel) tell him he is "giving away the store." So Ahab resists and Ben-Hadad considers what he will do.

Suddenly an unnamed prophet appears to Ahab to offer him one more chance to return to the LORD. "The LORD is going to give the Syrians into your hand," says the prophet, "so that *you will know that he is the LORD.*" Syria is driven back, twice, and the following spring Ben-Hadad sends emissaries to Ahab asking for peace. Ahab agrees, leaves the king of Syria unharmed, and signs a treaty between Israel and Syria.

Now you don't have to know too much Middle Eastern history, before or since, to know this is a very bad idea! Another prophet quickly appears to tell Ahab that his victory should lead him back to the LORD, not into alliance with the king of Syria, and that Ahab will pay for this, "your life for his life; your people for his people." Ahab responds to "the word from the LORD" by becoming "sullen and angry," and returning to his palace in Samaria.

He is still in that mood months later when he decides on a whim that he would like to acquire the excellent vineyard that lies right next to the royal palace. When its owner

Naboth declines to sell – we suspect there is some important imagery here of "Israel the vineyard of the LORD," which will not be sold to idolaters - Ahab is angry and goes off into a sulk and refuses to eat. Jezebel confronts her husband: "Is this how a king behaves? Who is in charge of Israel? Get up out of your bed! *I will get you the vineyard!*"

And of course she does, manipulating the elders of the city to denounce Naboth as a traitor and a blasphemer (which is pretty ironic for a Baal-worshipper!) and having him stoned to death. "Get up, here is your vineyard," she screams at Ahab. But of course at that moment, Elijah returns from the south, refreshed, ready once more to confront Jezebel and Ahab. "This is the word of the LORD," he says: "Because you have shed the blood of Naboth, your blood will be shed – dogs will lick up Ahab's blood, every last male descendant of Ahab will be slain, and dogs will devour Jezebel." Jezebel quickly disappears from the narrative, and for a long while – at last she is the one who is afraid and hiding! Ahab for the moment appears humbled (again!) and goes around in sackcloth.

The Syrian treaty breaks: there is a new invasion, and three years of war begin. Ahab is desperate enough to recruit the help of the southern kingdom of Judah, their one-time brothers now separated from them for 100 years. Jehoshaphat king of Judah agrees to fight with Israel only if they first "consult the LORD." Hundreds of prophets are consulted, and they all declare that Israel and Judah together will defeat Syria. But one "prophet of the LORD" named Micaiah knows better: "I see all Israel scattered on the hillsides like sheep without a shepherd," he says.

Ahab ignores him, and goes into battle – disguising himself out of fear. But the LORD is not deceived, and as the text wryly says

“someone drew his bow at random and hit the king of Israel between the sections of his armor.” Ahab dies sitting up in his chariot, and when he and it are returned to Samaria, dogs lick up his blood as his chariot is washed at the pool in the city. Elijah’s “word from the LORD” has come true, and Ahab is gone, at last.

3) *Fear and Faith*

What a saga! And there is more to come – Jezebel still lives! But what telling contrasts between two powerful men, Ahab and Elijah.

Ahab, like so many weak leaders, is fearful, often vicious, ready to let other people do his dirty work, more afraid of his wife than his God; ready to ignore the word of the LORD if it makes demands on him; pathetically ready to appear humble and to appease when he faces a stronger foe. Coupled to a wife of fierce determination and without scruples, he manages to lead Israel into their worst situation ever. The weakness, corruption and idolatry that Ahab sows in the life of his nation will in a century send them into annihilation at the hands of the growing power of the Assyrians, a far greater threat than their neighbors in Damascus.

Elijah of course also has his moments of fear – and perhaps as well as any Biblical character shows what it’s like to “come down from the mountain” after a great spiritual victory. The aftermath can be exhaustion, depression, despair, and an experience of being under attack. Thank God he sends his angels to provide rest and refreshment! Elijah then does the best thing anyone can do at that stage – he goes back to the source, to meet the LORD at the place where the covenant was first forged. Back at Mt. Sinai, the LORD appears to Elijah again, and speaks to him in a new voice, and gives him a new set of instructions. Elijah is sent back

“the way he came” to pick up his ministry to the same people, but with a renewed spirit and with new people to anoint – including his own successor!

And critically for his ministry, Elijah has to learn that he is *not*, despite what he imagines, “the only one left” who serves the LORD! “I have reserved for myself 7000 men in Israel who have not bowed to serve Baal,” says the LORD! God has far more resources, far more people, at his disposal, than his worn-out servants often imagine!

I think we can all empathize with Elijah. We all know a little about coming down into the valley after high moments. We also know what it means to reach a point where we say “*Lord, I have had enough!*” There are times – especially if we have been “very zealous for the Lord” – when the life of faith, when family life, when life itself, gets us so fatigued that we are worn out, we cannot put another foot forward. We reach a level where we can hardly admit to ourselves, let alone to anyone who depends on us, that we are *afraid* – afraid we will not have the strength to go on, afraid we will let other people down, afraid that we will make major mistakes, afraid that we will succumb to the enemy in some tragic way, afraid that we will “let God down.”

If you have lived there too much of the time, or are there now – lying under a bush in the desert saying “Lord, I have had enough, take my life” – then know you are not alone! Not only did Elijah do it, but so have many of the great saints of God. Even Jesus in Gethsemane experienced the same fear of the future and the demands it would place on him. But you are not alone, because the angels of God look down and see your need and hurry to bring you rest and refreshment. Sometimes they come in disguise, but they come.

At times you may feel, as Elijah did, that “I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me.” I can tell you (only half-jokingly) that this is a favorite text at Pastors’ conferences! The answer to that combination of hubris and self-pity is “No, you are *not* the only one left; God has thousands that you know nothing of!” So after you have rested, and the Lord has spoken to you again about your calling and your assignments, go back to ministry knowing about “the still small voice,” and about the thousands God has “reserved for himself!”

Even Jesus, when he felt most alone, most afraid, most oppressed, committed himself afresh to his Father and said “your will be done,” and then got up and did it. He said “legions of angels” were at his disposal if he really wanted them – but he decided to go straight through the darkness, straight through the fear, to confront his enemies and then emerge as victor over them. Jesus would die willingly, defeat sin and death, and rise again for the salvation of his people.

Israel did not realize they were going to die, and that their “life beyond death” would look very different from their past – much bigger, reaching to “the ends of the earth,” with Jews and Greeks and all kinds of Gentiles making up “the new Israel.” No idolatry in this kingdom, just worship of the one true God of all the world, through his incarnate Son, Jesus. No fear left, only faith in Jesus the Lord!

Let us pray...