

ELIJAH AND THE STILL, SMALL VOICE

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Elijah has been described by some biblical scholars as borderline bi-polar.

This week's story would give us to wonder if maybe they aren't right in their assessment of this most explosive and inflammable prophet.

Last week we saw him have tremendous success on Mt. Carmel when he went up against the Prophets of Baal. God answered his prayers and consumed the sacrificial bull, the altar, the dirt under the altar and the water in the trench around the altar. Baal was away for the weekend, apparently, because he didn't even show up for the event.

Elijah wins, hands down, the people are on their knees proclaiming the Lord and the prophets of Baal are all taken away and executed. YHWH is back on top. Baal has been banished from the country. What more could the prophet want, right?

Oh, sure, Queen Jezebel is a little mad, but what do you expect? She's a fanatical follower of Baal; those prophets who were executed were her guys. This next chapter opens with her sending a messenger to tell Elijah that she has put out a contract on his life.

But is she really serious? Why doesn't she just send an assassin? Or an officer to arrest him? Why warn him in advance that she intended to kill him or have him killed?

He takes her at her word, though, and flees out of her jurisdiction. The storyteller tells us that he goes to Beer-sheba which is all the way down below Jerusalem in the land of Judah where she can't get her hands on him. He leaves his servant there and then he goes out into the wilderness another day's walk and there he falls into a perfectly described state of depression.

He flops down under a desert bush – described as a “broom tree” – and he tells God that he wants to die. He ignores all of his successes and dwells on Jezebel, his one failure. He is suicidal. He has to be told to eat. He describes himself as alone in the world, friendless and unable to do the work that has been set before him by a demanding God.

He is incapable of seeing any light, only darkness. He spins everything that happens to him or has happened to him in the worst way possible and blames his every failure, his every problem, on other people.

If there has ever been a case of deep clinical depression in the Bible, this is it.

He is the perfect example of a burned out pastor.

BURNED OUT AND USED UP

Wait a minute! Aren't the words “pastor” and “burnout” oxymoronic?

Pastors have all that inner, spiritual, Holy Spirit strength. They don't get burned out...do they?

Another bubble...burst. Here are just a few of the statistics, according to research done by the New York Times just one year ago:

- 1,500 pastors leave their ministries each month due to burnout, conflict, or moral failure.
- The clergy have the second highest divorce rate among all professions.
- 57% say they would leave the pastorate if they had somewhere else to go or some other vocation they could do.
- 70% say they have no close friends.
- 75% report severe feelings of worry, bewilderment, anger, depression, fear, and alienation related to their work.
- 80% believe that pastoral ministry affects their families negatively.
- 90% feel unqualified or poorly prepared for ministry.
- 90% work more than 50 hours a week.
- Clergy have the third highest rate among all professions for drug abuse, alcoholism and suicide (only doctors and lawyers are higher).

Shocking, isn't it? Well, not if you're a student of the Bible. Think back through all those Old Testament stories we've heard this year. One of the recurring themes is that God always seems to pick imperfect vessels to carry his word and to do his work.

Our spiritual family tree is filled with thieves, liars, tricksters, harlots, pagans, brigands and just plain old kooks. When Jesus reaches into his prophetic past for advice and comfort, who is it that appears with him on the mountain? A convicted felon and murderer (Moses) and a manic depressive (Elijah).

And, yet, amazingly, God's will seems always to get done, eventually, through the work of these imperfect yet great human beings that God has raised up and chosen for his work. It is one of those paradoxes that sit at the center of our faith and make it so vibrantly real.

And it places a demand on us, as well.

As the people of God we are not allowed the luxury of sitting on the sidelines and saying, “Oh, Lord, I am not worthy.” God calls us into the game, incomplete, fractured, and imperfect as we are, and asks us to do the best we can with what we have. If there is greatness in us or in the work we do, it is greatness of God’s making, not our own.

And so it goes with Elijah

GOIN’ TO HOREB

Elijah lies down under the broom tree out in the desert and asks God to just let him die. He’s tired, he’s depressed, he feels overwhelmed, ill equipped and unable to handle the job that God has set before him.

God’s response to all this self-doubt and self-pity is to tell Elijah to eat something and then to send him on a forty day journey to Mount Horeb.

Mt. Horeb? That name sounds familiar to us, doesn’t it? If not, think of it by its other name, Mt. Sinai.

God’s desire is to refresh Elijah and renew his ministry and God chooses, as the place best suited for such a renewal, the same place where Moses was called to his ministry and where, later, Moses received the Ten Commandments and, when he came down from the mountain, cleaned house of all those who had chosen to worship the golden calf, an idol and a symbol of a foreign god, the same, basic work that he has called Elijah to perform in Samaria.

There are, for all of us, certain places that have symbolic weight for us, that, when we go there, we are returned to our essence, to our roots, our beginnings. There are places that, because of their history, inspire us, fill us with awe, renew our faith, and redirect our steps.

There is such a thing as Holy Ground.

When Moses stood on Horeb and beheld the burning bush, God told him to remove his shoes because he was standing on Holy Ground.

I have heard people say that, when they stepped through the gates of the memorial that stands where the Auschwitz concentration camp once stood, they were nearly overwhelmed with the compulsion to remove their shoes. And I have seen infant children suddenly cease their crying when they were carried near the Viet Nam Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Oscar Wilde was right when he said that, “Where there is sorrow there is Holy Ground.”

But it is not sorrow only that makes a place holy. Joy can do that, too.

Time after time we have attempted to move our Annual Conference gathering from Lakeside on Lake Erie to other, more central, more convenient, more hospitable, more reasonably priced venues. And time after time we have failed, the last time by fewer than a dozen votes.

Why? Lakeside holds less than a third of those required to be there, so people have to lodge as far as forty miles away and drive in every day. It is not even in our conference area. It is expensive. You have to stand in line for an hour if you want to eat at the normal meal times. And those lake bugs get in everything.

But it’s the place where they were ordained, or where they met their spouse, or where they were first called to their particular ministry. It’s the first place that they ever heard “O for A Thousand Tongues to Sing,” actually sung by a thousand tongues.

And because of the great joy they have felt there, the great sense of hope and peace and love and calling, they return, because it is, for them, Holy Ground.

What is your holy ground?

What is that place that, because of its history with you, lifts your spirit, inspires your heart, and renews your soul?

Where is your Mt. Horeb? How long has it been since you were there? When are you going back?

Unfortunately, all of that is lost on Elijah. He’s just too depressed.

He crawls into a cave and goes to sleep. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for cave is the same word that was used in the Moses story, but there it was translated as “cleft,” a shallow opening or depression in the face of the mountain. And it was in such a “cleft,” maybe in this very one, that Moses stood and was covered and protected by God’s hand as God passed by.

But that, too, is lost on Elijah. He’s asleep.

So God wakes him up by sending his word, probably through an angel, and asks him a pretty profound and important question: “Elijah, whataya doin’?”

Of course, Elijah, doesn’t give a straight answer, the answer we know that he wants to give – “I’m sleeping so leave me alone.” Instead, he gives a lament. He complains to God about the state of affairs that has driven him to this place. Oddly, his description shows that he has completely misinterpreted just about everything, as depressed people will often do.

First, he says, “I have been very zealous for the Lord,” which he has, so, okay give him that.

Then he says, “The Israelites have forsaken your covenant,” which is not exactly true. All Israelites have not forsaken God’s covenant. The King has and some of the leaders of the country have, but not all. In fact, we will later see

that a whole bunch of them (the number used is 7,000 but that is simply a biblical way of saying, “a whole lot”) have been faithful to YHWH all along.

He goes on, “They have thrown down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword.” Well, no, it wasn’t the Israelites who did that, it was Jezebel and her prophets of Baal who convinced King Ahab to let them do that but it wasn’t the Israelite people.

“I alone am left,” he says, which is just, simply, not true. What about those 100 prophets of YHWH that Obadiah saved and hid in the caves and brought food and water to every day for three years. They are still alive and kicking and doing’ God’s will.

“And they are seeking my life to take it away.” Okay, the only “they” involved in threatening him are Jezebel and Ahab, not the Israelite people. And the king and queen don’t seem to be too serious about it because they sent him a warning, probably hoping that he would just go away, which is exactly what he did.

So, Elijah is so depressed that he has completely misread everything that is going on around him. He has put the worst possible spin on every event that has occurred. He has assigned the most nefarious motives to every human being who he has come in contact with. And he has blamed everyone else, including God, for the situation in which he now finds himself.

If we see reflections of ourselves in this depiction of Elijah, it is only because the writer intend for that to happen.

The angel finally puts a stop to Elijah’s complaining and tells him to come outside of the cave because God is going to pass by here in a few minutes and “you really need to see this.”

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

So Elijah drags himself to the mouth of the cave where there is, presumably, a view of the whole valley below and he watches for God.

First there is a great wind, so strong that it breaks rocks and splits open the earth, maybe we would call it a tornado, but the writer calls it a wind. And Elijah thinks, “Whoa! God’s really coming, now.” But, the writer tells us, nope, God was not in the wind.

Then there’s an earthquake and, no doubt, Elijah thinks, “Okay, God’s really coming, now.” But the writer tells us, nope, God’s not in the earthquake.

Then there’s a great fire. Nope, God’s not in the fire.

Then there is that eerie silence that always follows a storm. The writer calls it “sheer silence.” Other translations call it “absolute silence,” “or total silence.”

And it is out of the silence, not out of the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but out of the silence that Elijah hears what we have come to call, “the still, small, voice” of God.

And in that still, small voice, God asks Elijah that most important, most theological, most profound and spiritual question of all, the same question that he asked through the angel back in the desert of Judah and the same question he asks of each of us every day of our lives: “Whataya doin’?”

Not, what are you believing. Not, what church are you going to. Not, what doctrines do you accept and what doctrines do you reject. Not, what’s your stand on abortion or homosexuality. Not, what political party do your belong to, or how much money did you make last year, or what color is your skin, or who were your ancestors.

No, the question he asks is simply: “Whataya doin’?”

Do you see how the storyteller challenges our expectations and assumptions, here? Do you hear him bursting our balloons and turning our view of God and creation and righteousness and sin and, well, just everything on their heads? All those things may be important to us, but they are, at the very most, secondary to God.

What God wants to know is, “Whataya doin’?”

Well, clearly, Elijah “ain’t doin’ nothin’.” He’s sleeping in a cave and waiting to die. (Do I really have to unpack the symbolic and metaphorical meaning of that sentence? Come on, work with me, people!)

But he recognizes God’s voice, God’s still, small voice, whispering through the silence. And he answers the question exactly as he did before, word for word: “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the people have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, killed your prophets, I’m all alone, blah, blah, blah.” Word for word, he repeats his negative and, basically, inaccurate spin on the state of the world, from his depressed point of view.”

God doesn’t bother to correct him. Rather, he gives him a task, a mission to complete and it has three parts:

Go to Damascus, the capital of Syria, and anoint Hazael, who is about to become king, there.

And go to Israel and anoint Jehu, who will become king, there.

And then go find a guy named Elisha, son of Shaphat in a town called Abel-meholah and anoint him to be your successor as my main prophet.

Elijah swallows his depression and does as he is told, but he actually accomplishes only one of the three tasks. He anoints Elisha to be his successor and Elisha accepts the job and becomes Elijah’s apprentice. Ahab and Jezebel continue to defy God and reject God’s covenant. Some of the people follow them and some don’t.

A few years after Elijah's death, Israel is invaded by King Hazael of Syria. When the crown prince of Israel is wounded in battle and has to return to Samaria, his general, Jehu, leads an insurrection with the encouragement of Elisha, and declares himself king. Most of the army follows him but not all, and a civil war breaks out.

Jehu makes peace with Syria and turns his eye on Samaria, the capital city. He invades the city with his army and Ahab and his son are killed in the battle. The only member of the royal family to survive is Jezebel who is hiding with her servants in a tower of the city wall.

Jehu tells his servants that they can turn her over to him or die with her, their choice, and a few minutes later Jezebel is flung from the tower by her servants.

The palace of Samaria has been cleansed; the leaders who defied the one God have been removed. Not quickly, by a hand from heaven, but eventually through the slowly evolving course of history, God's will has been done.

IN GOD'S OWN TIME, IN GOD'S OWN WAY

The story of Elijah's depressive episode and God's response is one that speaks to every person of faith.

Often, life does not go the way we want it to go or the way we expected that it would go and we become depressed and our depression gives us a skewed perspective on life and the whole world.

Everyone is against us. No one can be trusted. Life is a veil of tears and then you die. There's no hope. Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. Why even bother?

We have decided how God should behave and when God doesn't behave that way we feel robbed, cheated and lied to. We want the Damascus road experience. We want to be knocked to the ground and we want to hear the clear, clean, identifiable voice of Jesus. We want to see a burning bush that is not consumed. We want to see seas parted and we want to be led by a pillar of fire. We want to witness evil destroyed with a flash and a bang, and good rewarded with wealth and power and happily ever after.

That is how God should work, with acts that are grand and visuals that are spectacular, with special effects right out of Hollywood, and God would work that way all the time if he ever consulted with us.

But, the storyteller reminds us, sometimes God is not in the wind, or the earthquake or the fire. Sometimes God doesn't do things suddenly with a flash and a bang.

Sometimes God speaks in a still, small voice -- a whisper, if you will, that does not reverberate in our brain but tickles the very edge of our consciousness. Sometimes God does not work with sudden and explosive changes but through evolution that is slow and gradual and happens in the course of history.

And whether God's actions are quick or slow, sudden or gradual, they are almost always carried out by fractured, imperfect, sinful human beings who are made whole and perfect by God, for God, and through God's grace.

Human beings just like us.

AMEN