

The Book of Kings begins with Solomon on the throne and plods along under his varied successors until you get to chapter sixteen, where it begins to get really interesting. That is when Omri, up to that point dubbed “worst king ever” dies and is succeeded by his son, Ahab, who will reign for twenty-two years. (16:25) This comment from the narrator pretty much sums up what those two decades were like:

*Ahab, son of Omri, did what was displeasing to the Lord, more than all who preceded him. Not content to follow the sins of Jereboam, son of Nebat, he took as his wife, Jezebel, daughter of King Ethbaal of the Phoenicians and he went and served Baal and worshiped him. (16:30-31)*

What you need to know is that Baal is a god of fresh water, a rain god. So in chapter seventeen when we are introduced to Elijah the Tishbite, he is issuing a challenge: “*As the Lord lives, the God of Israel whom I serve, there will be no dew or rain except at my bidding.*” He is throwing down the gauntlet: Ahab has built an altar to Baal because he wants rain, but Elijah’s response is that it will only rain when YHWH says it will rain!

The problem with droughts is that they affect *everybody*, not just the bad people. Even Elijah will suffer the consequences of this drought. If you were in church two weeks ago, you heard about how Elijah shows up at the home of a widow in Sidon. She’s down to her last little bit of flour and oil and preparing to die, but when the prophet invites himself for dinner, she welcomes him to her table. She chooses hospitality and generosity over fear and shares the little bit she has, which as it miraculously turns, is enough.

By the time we get to chapter eighteen of First Kings, three years have passed and the famine brought on by this drought is much worse. Elijah approaches the people and puts it bluntly, the way prophets are prone to do: *How long will you keep limping along between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow God! If Baal, then follow Baal. But make up your minds already! (18:21)*

It is at this point that Elijah takes on 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. They get a bull and cut it in half for a sacrifice, and set up two wood piles. No matches allowed; *just prayer*. Elijah allows the prophets of Baal to go first and to pick their wood pile and bull. From morning until noon they shout: “O Baal, answer us!” *Nothing*. So then they performed what one translation calls a “hopping dance.” We get to see here that Elijah is a bit of a trash-talker because when nothing happens he chimes in: *why don’t you shout louder! Maybe Baal is sleeping and you need to wake him up! Maybe he’s deep in conversation with some other god, or he’s detained or maybe he’s away on vacation.* Nada. The narrator tells us the 450 prophets of Baal were “still raving;” but still, no fire.

Then it’s Elijah’s turn. He decides to make it interesting, filling four jars with water and soaking the whole thing. And then he says: *do it a second time. Actually you know what—do it a third time until water is running even around the trench of the altar! Until the whole thing is so sopping wet it would be impossible to light it up.* And then he prays:

*O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel! Let it be known today that you are God in Israel, and I am your servant, and that I have done these things at your bidding. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people might know who is God...*

And then? *Woosh*. Fire! An all-consuming fire that devours the bull, the wood, the stones, the earth, the water—everything! And everybody falls down on their faces and says, “Wow! The Lord alone is God. The Lord alone is God.” (18:39) What happens in the next verse, however, is very troubling. Elijah can’t just let it be; he turns the impressed crowd into a mob and tells them to seize the prophets of Baal and “let not a single one of them get away.” *So they seized them, and Elijah took them down to the Wadi Kishon and there he slaughtered every last one.* (18:40)

That brings us to today’s reading and gives us a much better context for understanding what we heard. Ahab has just reported to his wife, Jezebel, what happened on Mount Carmel and at the Wadi Kishon. She responds by sending a message to Elijah: *“So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.”* She is issuing his death warrant, saying that he will not get away with what he had done. So Elijah does what any of us would probably do; he runs away. As we heard, he came to Beer-sheba, where he leaves his servant to go on another day’s journey into the wilderness. To say that Elijah is tired and scared is probably an understatement:

*Elijah asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.*

Elijah is at a mountain that the narrator calls Horeb, but that earlier generations called Mt. Sinai. He’s back, in other words, at the very same place where the story of God’s people began, back where Moses got the Ten Commandments and encountered God in the midst of thunder and lightening.

*And then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He answered, “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.” And then the voice says: Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He answered, “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.” Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.”*

Now Episcopalians (including me) love that “sound of sheer silence” (or as the older translations put it, the “still small voice of God.”) We tend to like our worship and our prayer and our spirituality on the quiet side, tending more toward meditation than speaking in tongues or doing a hopping dance around altars. Fair enough. But the reason I’ve taken time to tell the larger story is that I’ve heard too many sermons on that “still small voice” that forget this larger context. The point of the story is not to encourage us to pray daily and include quiet times in our lives—although clearly those are very good and important practices.

The more important point of the story is that being faithful is risky, and sometimes it can even get you in trouble with the law. I think of St. Paul and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr. sitting in prison cells. As discouraging and isolating as that must have felt for them, perhaps they took some solace in remembering Elijah. And perhaps, they, too, in the sounds of silence were comforted by an awareness of God’s presence. I think of what those who have gone through (or perhaps even now are going through) what the mystics have called “the dark night of the soul”—when we feel like we are in a cave, lost somewhere in the wilderness, and feeling very afraid. And perhaps we, too, are ministered to by angels in those times.

In the silence, Elijah comes to realize that he is not alone. In that loneliest of places, he knows—not in his head only but in his heart and in his bones that God is present and that gives him the strength to go on. The Word of the Lord that comes to him in that sound of sheer silence reminds him that ultimately this is not all about him: there is work to be done, and he needs to go back and face that. He realizes anew that what he needs is strength and courage to do the work God has given him to do; not a get-out-of-ministry-free card.

And then, just like that, Elijah disappears. Next weekend I’ll be in Pennsylvania for my niece’s high school graduation party and worshipping in the United Methodist Church where I grew up. There, as here, we’ll hear the final chapter of the Elijah story—about how in a whirlwind and a chariot of fire he passes into the heavenly realms. We’ll hear how he passes the baton to his disciple, Elisha, so that even after he is gone the work can continue. He will vanish from our sight, at least until three years from now when we return to this cycle of readings again.

But who knows; maybe we’ll catch a glimpse of him from time-to-time between now and then? Every year at Passover our Jewish friends set a place at their Seder tables for Elijah, even as they pray for peace “next year in Jerusalem.” Who knows when he might show up—at their table, or perhaps even at ours?

And as Christians, we catch a glimpse of Elijah every Advent season when John the Baptist suddenly appears in the wilderness looking and sounding a lot like our friend as he proclaims that message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Like Elijah, John points beyond himself to insist that the future belongs to not to the Ahabs or Herods of this world but to the king of kings and lord of lords, the One who comes to bring peace on earth and good will to all.

In the meantime, there is work to be done, and no one said that work was easy. In fact Jesus said discipleship was about taking up a cross. May each of us hear, in the midst of the journey and in particular when the road is difficult—that sound of sheer silence: God’s unique call to each of us to do the work God gives us to do.