

A STILL, SMALL VOICE
I Kings 19:1-18

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 19, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

Introduction: Today's text is the story of Elijah the Prophet fleeing from the wicked Queen Jezebel after *his* God bested *her* gods in a battle over which deity could end a three-year drought. It is a long a dramatic story, most of which I will tell in the sermon, so I am going to read just a few verses at this point in the service.

Where we enter the story, Elijah has fled a death threat from the Queen and is hiding in a cave on Mt. Sinai to which the Lord has directed him. We begin at First Kings 19:11:

11 [The Lord] said [to Elijah],

'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; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

**

Our Nominating Committee is in full force, inviting people to accept nomination to church offices early next year. So if your phone rings in the next few weeks, even if it says, "Scam Likely," go ahead and answer it, because it may an invitation to serve, not a scam.

At a meeting early this week, within a span of about twenty minutes, two members asked me separately: "Why are you preaching on Elijah?"

I said: "Well, after a year of focusing on the crucifixion, I thought I would return to the Old Testament this summer. When I noticed the lectionary passages are drawn from the prophets, I decided to preach from them, since I have never done a series on the prophets." So between now and mid-August, we are going to hear about Elijah and Elisha and Isaiah and Amos.

I didn't get the sense that my answer was particularly reassuring, so I hope the series goes well, or may be an even longer, hotter summer than we expect.

Prayer: *Lord, let us hear your word, even when it comes from sources new and inscrutable. Let us hear in ways that speak from distant times and places to our time and place. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.*

I.

The Hebrew word for prophet is *navi*, which means a person who is summoned by God to be God's spokesperson in a particular time and place.

- There are fifteen books in the Old Testament that contain the speeches and oracles of the prophets:
These are

Isaiah
Jeremiah
Ezekiel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi.

They come at the end of our Old Testament, so those of us who have gainfully set out to read the Bible cover to cover often don't make it that far.

- Prophets speak with *great rhetorical power*; often lyrical and poetic. Much of Handel's *Messiah* comes from the prophet Isaiah. Our opening hymn today comes from a phrase in Jeremiah¹; the hymn surrounding the sermon² refers to the event we are reading from Elijah's life.
- Prophets use symbolic language and engage in symbolic acts – acts we might call today “performative art” if we resonate with them or “political grandstanding” if we don't.³
- Prophets are spokespersons for *God* on behalf of *God's will*, particularly in their *critique of their fellow Israelites worshipping gods other than Yahweh or mistreating or oppressing the poor*.
- Prophets confronts *kings* and *queens* and others in high places.
- They do *not* mince words.

¹ Jeremiah 8:22 KJV.

² “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind,” by John Greenleaf Whittier.

³ To symbolize the coming of Neo-Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, *Ezekiel* takes a brick, sketches on it an image of Jerusalem under attack, and lies on his left side for 390 days, one day for each year that the northern kingdom will be punished; and then he lies on his right side facing the brick for 40 days, one for each year of Judah's exile (4:1-8). *Jeremiah* buys and dons a new linen loincloth, walks 450 miles from Judah to the Euphrates River, hides it there in the rocks, returns to Judah, and then many days later makes the trip again to bring back the loincloth, now ruined, to make the point that the Judahites will soon be taken in exile to the Euphrates region, that is, to Babylon (13:1-11).

- They are *rarely* diplomatic.
- They have *dreams* and *visions* – Ezekiel’s wheel within a wheel⁴; Daniel’s Son of Man coming in the clouds from heaven⁵; Isaiah’s experience of God, high and lifted up, God’s train filling the Temple.⁶
- And prophets are among the most *eccentric* people we encounter in Scripture.
 - They are *intense*.
 - They are given to flights of religious *ecstasy*.
 - They hear the voice of God *more directly* than most of us hear.
 - They seem to live *off the land* and without marriage, children, family, friends.
- They often declare their message *loudly* and *demonstrably* in public places. They are the kind of people we veer away from when arriving at Nats Stadium; we would not likely them our extra ticket, particularly if in a seat next to ours.
- Prophets *make life miserable* for kings like David who forced himself on the wife of his military commander and arranged for that commander’s death⁷; and like King Ahab, who confiscated land from a man named Naboth and arranged for his death as well.⁸
- And it is hard to *listen* to prophets in church on Sunday morning and then get into our expensive cars to go to brunch at a nice restaurant (as I am doing after this service) or to poolside or golf at country clubs. We are even less inclined to tune into prophets when inflation rises and our stock portfolios decline.

Prophets arose in Israel about eight hundred years before the birth of Christ and had pretty much faded as a movement by the time he was born, but among the people of Israel they were strong enough in memory or legend that many associated John the Baptist with one of them – Elijah⁹ – and some wondered if Jesus himself was a prophet.¹⁰

II.

Beyond Nathan, who confronted King David, the first prophet we encounter in the Bible is Elijah, who confronted King Ahab. Ahab was a person of such raging evil that Melville chose his name to give to the obsessed sea captain seeking the great whale Moby Dick. In addition, Ahab was married to Queen Jezebel, whose very name has been bequeathed to literature as a symbol of a wicked and conspiring queen, and a name used to critique, stereotype, and even justifying the enslavement of women at different points in history.¹¹

⁴ Ezekiel 10.

⁵ Daniel 7.

⁶ Isaiah 6.

⁷ II Samuel 11-12.

⁸ I Kings 21.

⁹ John 1:19-28.

¹⁰ Matthew 16:13-14.

¹¹ The following articles are cited in Wikipedia, “Jezebel,” accessed 6/18/22: Donovan, Roxanne & Williams, Michelle (2002). ["Living at the intersection: The effects of racism and sexism on Black rape survivors" \(PDF\)](#). *Women & Therapy*. 25 (3–4): 95–105. doi:10.1300/J015v25n03_07. S2CID 143180295. Retrieved 17 April 2019; Buchanan, Nicole T. & Ormerod, Alayne J. (2002). ["Racialized sexual harassment in the lives of African American women" \(PDF\)](#). *Women & Therapy*. 25 (3–4): 107–

Speaking on behalf of God, Elijah warns Ahab – the King of Israel – that drought is coming. Ahab doesn't seem to respond. Elijah goes to the wilderness to wait for the drought, where he is fed by ravens. He encounters a widow and asks her for a morsel of bread and water; she only has a smidgeon and is reluctant to share what must sustain her and her son; but she shares anyway, and suddenly the containers in which she carries her oil and meal flow with abundance. Later, her son grows ill and dies; Elijah restores him to life and to her arms.¹²

The second time we see Elijah is three years into the drought. He confronts King Ahab about the gods whose worship Ahab inherited upon his marriage to Jezebel: the Canaanite gods of rain and thunder and lightning and dew – known as *Baals*. Elijah challenges Ahab and Jezebel to sponsor a contest to see whose deity can end the drought. Jezebel's gods go first, to no avail; Elijah puts then puts their prophets to death – not one of his moments we find endearing, but part of the narrative nonetheless.

Elijah then builds an altar, places wood on it, prepares a bull for sacrifice. Even though water is scarce, he douses the altar and the bull three times, so it is completely soaked. He then calls upon his God to appear; and God promptly reigns fire on the soaked altar, which consumes the sacrifice, licks up the water and ends the drought.¹³

But Jezebel is not deterred. She composes one of the more poetic death threats in all of literature and sends it via messenger 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 [the prophets]
by this time tomorrow.*

A threat of death from a Queen named Jezebel to be carried out “*by this time tomorrow.*” Elijah flees for his life, following his short-lived victory.

He comes to the edge of the wilderness; leaves his servant behind; goes a full day's journey into the wilderness; sits under a broom tree whose *solitary* profile against the moonlit sky is as *lonely* as his own life. He lifts his voice to God:

*It is enough;
Now, O Lord, take away my life,
For I am no better than my ancestors.*

Like Rebekah,¹⁴ Job¹⁵ and Jeremiah,¹⁶ Elijah questions whether he wants to live.

124. [doi:10.1300/J015v25n03_08](https://doi.org/10.1300/J015v25n03_08). [S2CID 144425126](https://doi.org/10.1300/J015v25n03_08). Retrieved 17 April 2019; Pilgrim, David. ["Jezebel Stereotype"](#). Jim Crow Museum. Ferris State University. Archived from [the original](#) on 28 July 2011. Retrieved 29 July 2011.

¹² I Kings 17.

¹³ I Kings 18.

¹⁴ Genesis 25:22.

¹⁵ Job 3:11.

¹⁶ Jeremiah 15:10.

One of the great Hebrew scholars of our day, Robert Alter of Berkeley, says that the pattern of Elijah's life is

- Confrontation
- Triumph
- Dejection.¹⁷

It is enough... O Lord, take away my life....

**

Elijah does not end his life and neither does God. Elijah falls asleep and at some point is awakened by *the touch of an angel*, who says,

"Rise and eat."

Elijah looks up and sees bread and water on a rock. He eats and drinks goes back to sleep.

The angel touches him a *second* time:

"Rise and eat, or the journey will be too much for you."

Elijah rises and eats and drinks, and the meal sustains him in the wilderness for that oft-repeated Biblical measurement: forty days and forty nights.

Elijah then goes all the way to Mt. Horeb (Mt. Sinai), where God had given Moses the Ten Commandments.¹⁸ Elijah is the only person God ever sends back to that holy mountain after Moses and the Israelites have departed. Elijah spends the night in a cave (like the crevice in which Moses had hidden from God when God was about to pass by¹⁹). In the middle of the night, the Lord comes to Elijah: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah answers:

*I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts;
For the Israelites have forsaken your covenant,
They have thrown down your altars,
They have killed your prophets with the sword.
I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.*

Alone. Like the solitary broom tree against the moonlit sky.

God answers:

Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord,

¹⁷ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: Volume 2 Prophets* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 432.

¹⁸ Exodus 19:20.

¹⁹ Exodus 33:22.

*[this mountain on which Moses stood],
for the Lord is about to pass by.*

There is a wind. There is an earthquake. And there is fire. All ways God traditionally appears to Moses and others of God's people.²⁰ But the Lord is *not* in the wind, *not* in the earthquake, *not* in the fire.

But after the fire, Elijah hears "a still, small voice," or, channeling Simon and Garfunkel, "a sound of sheer silence," "a sound of silence."²¹

Elijah wraps his face in his mantle – because it was thought that anyone other than Moses who sees God face to face will die.²² Elijah then hears God again ask:

'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

Despite having heard "the still small voice," Elijah can only answer the way he had answered God before:

*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.*

Confrontation. Triumph. Dejection. Despite the "still, small voice," Elijah remains in despair.

This time the Lord responds with a charge:

*Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus;
When you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael
As king over Aram (Syria).
Also you shall anoint
Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel;
And you shall anoint
Elisha...as prophet in your place...*

God then reminds Elijah that there are 7000 people who, like Elijah, have *not* bowed to the worship of the gods over whom Elijah has recently triumphed. In other words, Elijah is not alone.

This time Elijah obeys God, "sets out from there," and carries out the anointings God has commissioned.

Confrontation. Triumph. Dejection. Commission. Obedience.

Elijah goes on with his work and his life.

²⁰ Exodus 3:3; Judges 5:4-5; Psalm 18:7-15; Psalm 68:7-8; Habakkuk 3:15.

²¹ Paul Simon, "The Sound of Silence," 1964.

²² Exodus 3:6.

III.

Not all the sermons in this series will be as “storied” as this one, but I will close by simply saying:

Sometimes,
Not always but sometimes,
It helps to be reminded
That we are *not* alone.

*“Elijah, there are 7000 others who have not bent the knee.
7000. You are not alone.”*

Sometimes,
Not always but sometimes,
It helps to be reminded
That the way we find healing
Is through accepting a task God has given us,
Assuming a responsibility God has confidence we can do
Even though we may lack such confidence.

And sometimes,
Not always but sometimes,
It is in a holy site, a holy place,
A place we have worshipped before,
A place where those in prior generations
Have worshipped,
That we receive our commission,
Fulfill our task,
Re-discover we are not alone.

A new task
In a holy place
Where we have been before.
We are not alone.

Amen.