

The Powerless Goodness of God
I Kings 19:1-18
Ephesians 4:25-5:2

“...and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”

If you begin at the beginning with Elijah, you never could imagine him sitting alone under a broom tree wishing himself dead at the end. Elijah’s prophetic career takes place during the reign of Ahab and Ahab’s idol-worshipping wife Jezebel. “Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel,” we read, “than had all the kings of Israel who were brought before him.” That, my friends, is saying a lot! But I would add that prophets in Ahab’s day may not have been at the top of their game either. For out of nowhere, with no credentials, not even a call story, Elijah appears to tell the king that, as the Lord lives, “there will be neither dew nor rain” until *Elijah* says so.

Fast forward three years later, the land now dried up and the livestock dead or dying, God orders Elijah to go back to Ahab with the promise that God will send rain on the earth. When Ahab sees the prophet, he exclaims famously, “Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” Saying nothing about rain, the prophet instead orchestrates a confrontation between himself and four hundred prophets of Baal while the people look on. The prophets of Baal cry, “O Baal, answer us!” Baal is silent: no voice, no answer, no response. Then with great drama (cue the chorus from Felix Mendelssohn’s “Elijah”), the prophet calls upon the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel,” whose fire consumes the offering and causes the people to fall on their faces saying, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.” Finally Elijah orders the execution of all the prophets of Baal and soon thereafter the rain begins to fall.

The next scene is where we entered the story this morning, as the Baal-loving Queen’s death-threat sends the prophet running for his life and longing for his death under the broom tree in the wilderness. Life can certainly turn on a shekel. One minute you have single-handedly orchestrated the defeat and death of hundreds of false prophets and the next minute you think your life is an utter failure. As one commentator put it, “This story calls out to those among God’s people who are worn-out, fearful, or in need of renewal,” and I sort of get that. On the week that included the anniversary of racially-charged protests in Ferguson, Missouri *and* an alt-right rally laced with racial hatred in Charlottesville, Virginia, on a Sunday when white supremacists are again on the march in Washington, I am thinking of so many who have worked for civil rights and racial equity in God’s name since Brown vs. Board of Education in the 50’s and who must be tempted, these sixty plus years later, to despair under a broom tree in the face of racial divisions growing meaner by the tweet and by the taunt.

But I also think of the Civil Rights giants I met a few weeks ago at Alex Haley’s Farm in Tennessee where I participated in the Children’s Defense Fund’s Proctor Institute: James Lawson, Taylor Branch, Otis Moss, Jr., and Marion Wright Edelman, to name a few, all colleagues of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose determination has not abated and whose hope for God’s reign has not dimmed. Reading the story of Elijah in the midst of this last week set me to wondering about the difference between those who burn-out and wear-out in well-doing and those who keep on keeping on.

I think the writer of the Elijah story meant for us to ask just that question, first by taking pains to draw parallels between Elijah and Moses. Even a casual reader of Scripture must hear the echo of Moses’s story in Elijah’s: sojourning in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights to Horeb; waiting for God’s Presence to pass by in the cave, in a cleft in the rock; hiding his face with his mantle as Moses’ face was covered by God’s hand lest either see God face to face and die; witnessing the wind, earthquake and fire of God’s revelation to Moses before there is only the sound of sheer silence.

But as Rabbi Shai Held remarks, “Elijah is no Moses.” He suggests that the difference between Elijah and Moses is, in part, the difference between a self-righteous zealot and a righteous servant of God. I would add that the former may be more likely to burn-out in well-doing while the latter may be more likely to persevere to the end. That there is no story about God’s call of Elijah to speak God’s word; that he simply appears and begins to speak for the Lord now becomes a significant detail. So too, Elijah telling the king that when the rain does return to Israel it will be *by the word of Elijah* rather than the word of the Lord is revealing. The dialogue that happens in the mind of the self-righteous is often a dialogue between id and ego, a dialogue familiar to most of us, I

suspect.

In stark contrast, Moses' call story is the beginning of an enduring relationship with God marked at every turn by honest and even contentious conversation. When God sends Moses to Pharaoh to bring God's people out of Egypt, Moses is nonplused: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" God says, "I will be with you." Moses persists in his self-doubt and God persists in God's assurance, saying finally, "I will be with your mouth...and will teach you what you shall do." Prayer is the inner dialogue of God's prophets.

So in the first place, self-righteous zealots, those whose inner dialogue is with themselves as spokesperson for a cause, however good or just, may be more likely to end up running on empty, whereas those who continue to wrestle with God's call (again I think of the Civil Rights leaders I met, now in their 80's and 90's, teaching us still), those who seek guidance in and are chastened by God's living word are more likely to keep their eyes not on their successes or failures but on the horizon of God's promises.

In the second place, self-righteous zealots often act in God's name to make a name for themselves. I had never noticed before that the pyrotechnic contest on top of Mt. Carmel was Elijah's idea rather than God's command. Even when Elijah asks God to let it be known that "you are God in Israel, that I am your servant and that I have done all these things at your bidding," the fire of the Lord comes down without the narrator adding "according to the word of the Lord." In fact, the farther you get into the Elijah narrative, the more God is absent, another clue to the short-lived passion of zealots.

To be fair, Moses does some pretty spectacular things in God's name, but when you read the story of the exodus, you can barely get through a verse without reading that God told Moses to do thus so, Moses did as he was told, and God accomplished the miracle. Moses' righteousness, his right relationship with God, led him to will God's will so that God's name and not his own might be known. It is enough to go on and it is clean contrary to our current culture!

Then there is the phenomenon of the zealot who *alone* is a righteous victim. Twice Elijah says in his despair that the Israelites have abandoned God's covenant when they had just pledged themselves anew to God; says that the Israelites are seeking to kill him when only Jezebel is after him; says that he, and he alone, remains loyal to God's covenant when there are seven thousand in Israel who have not "bowed the knee to Baal." In his zeal, Walter Brueggemann writes, "as often happens to the zealous, Elijah has overvalued his own significance" and become blind to a multitude of allies, including the hundred prophets hidden from Jezebel by the real hero of this story, a palace official named Obadiah. More than any other reason, it is this singular, isolating, moral self-importance that drives the zealot to despair.

Again to be fair, Moses certainly gets exasperated with the thousands of Israelites complaining in the wilderness. But unlike Elijah who throws the Israelites under the chariot like a prosecuting attorney, Moses is the people's defender, pleading endlessly with God on their behalf. Moses' call is to lead God's people to the Promised Land even though he does not get there himself. Over and over again, these civil rights champions said that the church kept them going in their darkest hours. Not that I am a prophet, but were it not for all of you, more than you will ever know, I would be under a broom tree!

Finally, what are we to make of the sound of sheer silence? I honestly think Elijah heard nothing, for when he is asked by God before and after the revelation, "What are you doing here?" Elijah's answer is word for word the same: "I have been 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." Had he encountered the living God on the mountain, it seems to me, a little self-doubt might have crept into his psyche. What more could the powerless goodness of God do to break through the impervious self-righteous zeal of this prophet? "Go back," God says to Elijah, "and anoint your successor."

"Where and why does Elijah go wrong?" Rabbi Held asks in the end and concludes that the "line between righteousness and self-righteousness is exceedingly fine. Elijah's zealotry [not only] leads him to cross it ... [but also causes him] to see others in a spectacularly ungenerous light. A prophet can love God with abiding passion, but if he comes to hate God's people, God will look elsewhere for faithful servants." In this age that is overrun with zealous prophets who love God and hate people in God's name, I pray that the righteousness of the one--whose love is daily being crucified by the self-righteous zealotry in us all--will be sufficient, in the end, to save us from ourselves. Amen.