

1 Kings 19:1-19 (NRSV)

[Elijah, as the prophet of God, has just won a stunning victory over the priests of Baal. In the confrontation of God and Baal, the Canaanite god was a complete no-show. But Elijah's victory and his killing of the priests of Baal only deepened Queen Jezebel's hatred of him.]

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ²Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "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." ³Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

⁴But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." ⁵Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." ⁶He 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. ⁷The 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." ⁸He 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. ⁹At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰He 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."

¹¹He said, "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. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴He 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." ¹⁵Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

¹⁹So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing.

Have you ever felt worn down, that you'd had enough. Enough struggle, enough confrontation, enough anxiety . . . simply enough. Despite his success at Mt. Carmel, Elijah was ready to die. He was burned out.

What a win¹. Elijah alone against 450 priests of Baal. The LORD God v. Baal. The crowds gathered, expecting quite a show. And they got it. Yet, in the end, Elijah still faced a determined and evil enemy. He had managed to cow King Ahab, but not his wife, Jezebel. She was more determined than ever to track Elijah down, find him, and kill him.

So Elijah ran and he ran far. Right into the Sinai wilderness, where Moses had run after killing the Egyptian overseer. Elijah had been in the wilderness a single day when he found a shady bush (politely called a "tree" in translation), under which to sit . . . and to die. Elijah told God that he'd had enough. Despite the Mt. Carmel triumph, he asked to die.

But God would not let go. Instead, God sent Elijah an angel, who twice set out food and water for Elijah as he slept. Both times, Elijah woke up and ate, strengthened and encouraged to begin a long journey.

¹See the page three textbox for the story of God's victory on Mt. Carmel.

A Kingdom Divided – the basics

If you don't understand the basics of Israel's history, the Old Testament can be very confusing. The following may help.

The twelve tribes got their first king, Saul, more than a thousand years before Jesus. David took the throne from Saul and passed it on to his son, Solomon, who took the kingdom to its political and economic zenith. He used the wealth to build a great temple in Jerusalem. He expanded the borders of Israel. But Solomon also sowed the seeds of Israel's destruction.

Solomon had a thousand wives and concubines, most of whom were foreign. His wives brought the worship of foreign gods into Israel and turned Solomon's own heart away from the LORD God and toward other gods (see 1 Kings 11). Despite the building of the temple, the people would soon abandon their covenant with God.

The united kingdom had always struggled under the threat of rebellion and tribal warfare. Toward the end of Solomon's reign, Jeroboam, a leader among the northern tribes, led a rebellion against Solomon. Though Jeroboam was unsuccessful at the time, upon Solomon's death and some unwise decisions by his son and successor, Rehoboam, Jeroboam was able to split the kingdom in two in 921BC. The ten northern tribes followed Jeroboam, who became the first king of the northern kingdom, Israel. The largest Israelite tribe was that of Judah which, with the tribe of Benjamin, constituted the southern kingdom, Judah. Rehoboam was the first king of Judah (1 Kings 11).

From 1 Kings 11 forward, the book of Kings traces the history of the two Israelite kingdoms, Israel and Judah, in parallel. The successive kings of each kingdom are named and most got a report card from God! Most got a failing grade – they did what is evil in the sight of God (e.g., see 1 Kings 15:25) and Ahab was the worst of the lot. Doing evil in God's sight meant that the king had led the people away from YHWH, the LORD God, to the worship of other gods. Only a few, like Hezekiah, did what was right in God's sight (e.g., 2 Kings 22:1-2), leading the people back to the worship of the one true God.

Though the kingdoms would enjoy periods of peace and prosperity, both were on a path toward destruction and death. Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722BC. Judah and Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586BC.

For forty days and forty nights, Elijah made his way to the same mountain where Moses had met God at the burning bush and later received the Law. It was called Mt. Horeb (or Mt. Sinai), the mountain of God. There, like Moses,² Elijah would meet with God.

When God asks Elijah what he is doing at the mountain, it is clear that Elijah's depression has not passed entirely. He has been zealous for God, but Elijah is certainly not the only prophet left. He is not as alone as he feels. Nonetheless, God tells Elijah "to stand before the LORD," for God is going to pass by him, just as God did for Moses.

Soon there come typical biblical theophanies, i.e., manifestations of God's presence. A powerful wind, an earthquake, and a fire. These are all the traditional language of God's arrival (e.g., see Exodus 19:16 or all of Psalm 29). God is not *in* them, of course, but they all speak of God's presence. After these theophanies pass, all that is left is the "sound of sheer silence."³ Yet, in this stillness, the hushed sound, Elijah somehow encounters God.

However, unlike Moses, who emerged from his God-time with a face that shone of God's glory (Exodus 34:29), Elijah seems unchanged! God asks Elijah the same question he asked before passing by and Elijah gives exactly the same answer. So far as Elijah is concerned, this humbling encounter with God hasn't changed things at all.

So, speaking to him for a third time, God tells Elijah, "Go, return to your way." There might have been no evident change in Elijah, he might still be a burned-out prophet, but God has fed him, rescued him, and now God sends him north to work. He is to anoint not only an Israelite king, but a Gentile king as well. And, most significantly, Elijah is sent to meet his God-chosen successor, Elisha.

Burned out but back

Despite the angel's intervention, Elijah is burned out when he gets to God's mountain and is still burned out after God's visit. Yet, God doesn't let him go, doesn't give him a pass. I'm sure that if you told Elijah of his

²The writer skillfully draws out numerous parallels between Moses and Elijah: the forty days in the wilderness, the mountain of God, the manifestations of God, the cave, even God's "passing by" of Elijah. See for example, Exodus 33:12–23; 34:33–35. Sometimes, we are tempted to see these God-breathed biblical writings as mere recountings of events, blinding us to their art and even to their meaning.

³The NRSV translates the Hebrew as "the sound of sheer silence." The KJV used the well-known phrase, "a still small voice," implying that God was now speaking quietly to Elijah. This way of reading the Hebrew survives in the NIV ("a quiet whisper") and some other translations. Perhaps disappointingly to some of us, the Hebrew here says nothing about God speaking, it simply is about silence or perhaps a hushed sound. How we wish the writer told us more!

future, he wouldn't have believed it. Elijah would escape death, instead riding directly to heaven in a chariot of fire, drawn by fiery horses, and carried upward by a whirlwind.

Perhaps it is this way for us as well. When we are used up and have had enough, God can see what we cannot, a future still filled with surprising possibilities. Elijah had a comeback alright, but it was God who not only dragged him through it but refused to let go. God wouldn't let Elijah give up. It is as if God shoved him forward into his future. God still had work for Elijah. And God always has work for us as well, for, like Paul, we are ministers of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6), bearing witness to the Good News in all that we say and do.

The Story of Elijah and the Big Win

The book of Kings (1 and 2 Kings are a single literary work) is a tragic story of a faithful God pursuing a faithless people. In 869BC, Ahab ascended to the throne of Israel, the northern Israelite kingdom. Though most of the kings before and after Ahab "did evil" in God's sight, Ahab "did evil in the sight of YHWH (the LORD) more than all who were before him" (1 Kings 16:30). Ahab married Jezebel, a foreigner, and turned to the worship of Baal, the supreme god of the Canaanites. It is here that we meet the prophet Elijah, who intervened in the religious crisis brought on by Ahab and Jezebel. The story of Elijah's confrontation with Jezebel and with the priests of Baal is one of the great biblical narratives.

When Elijah arrives on the scene in 1 Kings 17, he heads immediately for King Ahab. The first challenge that Elijah lays down before Ahab sets the stage for all that follows. In the arid regions of Palestine, rain was scarce and life-giving. Baal was worshiped as the bringer of rain. Thus, when Elijah promises the Baal-worshipping Ahab a drought, he is saying that Baal is a fraud, that Baal cannot bring rain. Baal cannot give life. Instead, life is YHWH's alone to give and to take away.

The stories that follow are all stories of the LORD God's life-giving power. God tells Elijah to flee from Ahab and hide in a ravine, for God has ordered ravens to feed him there. Then, God sends Elijah to see a widow, whom God also instructs to feed Elijah. However, when Elijah arrives, the widow can't feed herself and her son, much less Elijah. But then, in a surprising display of God's life-giving power, the widow's jar of flour and bottle of oil are filled and would not run out. Then, just in case we've missed the point, the widow's son becomes ill and dies. Elijah prays over the boy and God restores him to life. It is all about life, life, and more life.

When God tells Elijah to return to Ahab, Elijah directly challenges the priests of Baal to a contest. It would be YHWH vs. Baal. But the contest is not really a contest at all. In one of the most dramatically told stories in Scripture (told in 1 Kings 18), Baal is a complete no-show, being no more than a figment of the Canaanite spiritual imagination.

On that day, in a spectacular display of God's power and presence, Elijah showed all those who had ears to hear and eyes to see that the LORD God was not merely the best god on the block, the LORD was the only God, the creator and ruler of all that was, is, or will be.

And after God's victory? Rain, in huge rushing torrents. Yes, it is YHWH and only YHWH who gives life.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, JUNE 15 – JUNE 21

Next week's comeback story is that of David, after his own son leads a rebellion against him and seizes the throne.

Monday, 2 Samuel 13:1 David's violence against Bathsheba will now be visited upon his household. One son, Amnon, rapes a half-sister, Tamar, and, two years later, is murdered by the girl's brother, Absalom, who is David's favorite. Absalom then flees. (David has multiple wives and has children by several of them. Thus, his children are an assortment of full and half-siblings.)

Tuesday, 2 Samuel 14 The story of Absalom's return from "exile."

Wednesday, 2 Samuel 15:1-12 After his return home, Absalom gets a chilly reception from King David and soon begins to conspire against his father.

Thursday, 2 Samuel 15:13 – 16:14 Absalom's rebellion is launched and David has to flee Jerusalem.

Friday, 2 Samuel 16:15 – 17:29 David's trusted adviser, Ahithophel, goes over to Absalom. David hatches a plot to overcome this additional betrayal.

Saturday, 2 Samuel 18:1 – 19:10 David defeats Absalom in battle, but Absalom is murdered by David's general, Joab, despite David's explicit orders that Absalom be kept safe. David is overcome by his grief.

Sermon Notes

Reading The Good Book Better

A new *Something Else* series continues this week

Our series on creation and evolution revealed that the way we read the Bible shapes our understanding of evolution and other topics. Indeed, it shapes the way we see the world.

In this series, we'll look at various interpretational issues, as well as some keys to understanding the many translations that are available now.

This week: "Mother of Eight Shoots Hole in One"

Next week: "Be Careful Where You Ask for a Doggie Bag"

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Burn out. If haven't experienced it, you will. Not so oddly, Elijah's big win over the priests of Baal only accentuated his burnout. He couldn't have been surprised that Jezebel was coming after him. But the victory one day, only made the next day's defeat that much more crushing.

Have you been through a time of burnout, when you felt used up, that you'd just had enough? Can you recall how you felt at the time? What was the state of your faith during that time? Did the difficulties make you feel closer to God or further away?

Certainly, in Elijah's case, the burnout and his relationship with God seem to have been intertwined. He stands in the presence of God just as Moses had, yet Elijah is so lost in his own malaise that he is unchanged by the encounter. It is as if God is in the room and Elijah just sits there, staring blankly into the distance, lost in his own misery and emptiness.

Perhaps it was just as hard for Elijah to compartmentalize himself (burned out in one part, faith strong in the another) as it is for us. The reason we don't compartmentalize well is that God has created us as whole persons. We are to love God with our heart, our mind, our soul, and our strength. Every bit of ourselves. We are, each of us, a unity. We can't chop ourselves up into parts, or at least not for long.

Job burnout or marriage difficulties affect our whole self, even our faith and our relationship with God. Perhaps Elijah's comeback story reminds us of the importance of avoiding burnout, of acting to prevent it. Once we are in the midst of it, our reserves are gone and, too often, our faith seems to have gone too. We wonder where God is, when he actually is still right there. We just can't sense him because we've been numbed by the burnout. Does this make sense to you? Does it describe any of your own experiences?