Hi,

Another Hump Day in isolation. I really do hope that you and yours are hanging in there and making wise choices. We will get through this. Truly.

* **My Monday class next week will not meet**, as Patti and I will be away for the day.
* Please take a few minutes and complete [our survey of the congregation](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/56LPWQ8). It will help our church leaders to make better decisions in the weeks ahead.
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org/). All the postings are up-to-date.
* Keep sending in those movie and book recommendations.

With so much death around us, perhaps we should remember that God is the Giver of Life, as seen in the stories of Elijah and Elisha. Here is a brief introduction to these two prophets of God.

***2 Kings 2:1-10 (NRSV)***

**Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?” And he said, “Yes, I know; keep silent.”**

**Elijah said to him, “Elisha, stay here; for the Lord has sent me to Jericho.” But he said, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they came to Jericho. The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?” And he answered, “Yes, I know; be silent.”**

**Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.” But he said, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.**

**When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” He responded, “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.”**

A common misconception is that the ancient Israelites were always monotheistic. However, when God tells them that they are to have no other gods than YHWH (Exodus 20), it is a literal prohibition against worshiping the other assorted gods that the Israelites believed existed. During the days of Abraham and Moses and even David, the Israelites believed that the Lord God was the biggest and best god on the block, but not the only god.

Thus, we shouldn’t be surprised that much of the Old Testament is taken up with confrontations and contests between YHWH and his rivals. For example, the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh is actually a contest between YHWH and an Egyptian deity. When the Ark of the Covenant is captured by the Philistines, it sets up a contest between YHWH and the Philistine deity, Dagon. Not surprisingly, God wins every time. There are no other gods!

With the advent of the prophet Elijah in the ninth-century BC, the Israelites came to the growing recognition that not only was YHWH the best god on the block, he was the only God! The Israelites would become fiercely monotheistic, setting them apart from all the peoples around them. The Jews would proclaim that there was only one God and that this one God had chosen them to be his people.

*YHWH, the giver of life*

When Elijah arrives on the scene in 1 Kings 17, he heads immediately for King Ahab of the northern kingdom, Israel. The writer of Kings prepares us for what is coming. We are told that though the kings had been a bad lot, Ahab was the worst, for he served and worshiped the Canaanite god, Baal.

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-worshiping 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. God then orders ravens to feed him there. Then, God sends Elijah to see a widow, whom God will also instruct 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.

*The climactic confrontation*

When God tells Elijah to return to Ahab, Elijah directly challenges the priests of Baal to a contest. It would be YHWH v. Baal. But the contest is not really a contest at all. In one of the most dramatically told stories in Scripture, 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.

*Knowing the Life-Giver*

These are ancient stories, but it isn’t very hard to get inside them, to make these stories our own. We still live in a world in which many people deny that the Lord God is the Life-Giver. Some may simply never give it much thought. Others may have looked for life in other gods. Still others have made themselves comfortable with the notion that life is simply the result of time and random mutation acting on a primordial soup.

But can we really understand life without knowing the Life-Giver? Can we find the meaning of life if we look any place other than the God-Who-Is? Then, as now, truly embracing life means embracing the God who gives it

*A bit more -- the divided kingdoms*

The Old Testament can be pretty hard to follow without a basic understanding of the people and the kingdoms. Here is the story of how the united kingdom of Israel divided in two nearly a thousand years before Jesus.

Solomon, the third and the last king of the united tribes, took the kingdom of Israel to its political and economic zenith. He used the wealth to build a great temple in Jerusalem. He expanded the borders of Israel. But he 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’s abandonment of the covenant between God and his people could lead only to a bad end.

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. 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 (see 1 Kings 11 for all this).

From 1 Kings 11 forward, the book of Kings traces the history of the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. The successive kings of each kingdom are named and most get a report card from God. Most of the kings got a failing grade – they did what was evil in the sight of God (e.g., see 1 Kings 15:25). Doing evil in God’s sight meant that the king had led the people away from YHWH 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 fell to the Babylonians in 586BC.

*Movie recommendation*

Sharon and Bob Kerr recommend *A River Runs Through It.* Sharon writes: “The movie first appealed to me (other than Robert Redford's voice, and actor Brad Pitt) because of being raised Presbyterian. I could relate so well to the Maclean family's M.O. But more than that, the analysis of characters, plus so many lines were very thought provoking.” I remember Tom Skerrit’s definition of a Methodist: “a Baptist that can read.” Still makes me chuckle.

*Book recommendation*

I’ve been seeing a few things cross my desk about the pandemic being the opening of the seals in Revelation 6. Don’t believe it; in fact, we’ll take a look at the four horsemen in tomorrow’s email. Here is the best book on Revelation that I’ve come across in a long-time: *Revelation and the End of All Things*, by Craig Koester.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott