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Pentecost 13

“What are you doing here, Elijah?” My grandparents’ generation would have known the answer to that question. But for my age group and those coming after, this isn’t so familiar. We tend not to be acquainted with much Old Testament scripture beyond Genesis and Exodus. So let me tell you the story of what Elijah was up to.

It all started generations before with King Solomon, David’s son who succeeded him on the throne of Israel. Solomon completed the radical shift away from the law of Moses, which centers on God’s desire for equality and well-being for all the people.

Instead Israel became an empire where God apparently blessed whatever the king wanted. In the words of Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggeman, what was established was the Royal Theology. The leading of God was replaced by a standing army, a huge bureaucracy, the extravagant building of palaces and harems, and a system of oppressive taxation to support them. And the king didn’t need to worry about protests from the official priesthood, because he had built them a nifty, glorious temple. Everything ran efficiently to make Solomon happy.

But neither God nor Israel were happy, and the kingdom split in two when Solomon’s reign concluded. Afterward came a succession of kings, most of whom are described in scripture as “doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord.” But surely the worst of them all was Ahab, egged on by his more famous wife Jezebel. They were ruthless tyrants, taking whatever they wanted, making official the worship of the false god, Baal, and killing the prophets of the Lord.

It was then that God raised up Elijah to be a prophet, to confront Ahab and the idolatry of the Royal Theology. Ahab couldn’t seem to turn around without finding Elijah underfoot, denouncing his sinful rule. It got to the point where the king even came up with a little nickname for the prophet greeting him with, “Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” To which Elijah’s response was, “I’ll show you who’s the actual troubler, and whose god is real. Bring all your prophets of Baal to the top of Mt. Carmel, gather the people, and we’ll have a little demonstration.”

So Ahab’s 450 hired prophets showed up, and two bulls were slaughtered for sacrifice, one for Baal, one for Elijah’s God. Each bull was put on an altar, but

the priests were not allowed to light a fire to burn the offering. Instead, Elijah told the 450, "You go first. If Baal is god, you should be able to call on him to send down fire from heaven to consume your offering." And they tried really, really hard, but no luck from Baal.

Then Elijah took his turn. He raised the stakes by having the people dump buckets and buckets of water over the altar of the Lord. Then he called on the God of Israel to send down fire, and there was an immediate response, burning up the bull, the wood and stone of the altar, and even the water that was thrown over it. Elijah shouted to the people that now they could see who is truly God, and he instructed them to put to death all the prophets of Baal. It was such a triumph that Elijah was filled with elation.

But when Jezebel heard what happened she was enraged, and promised that she would make Elijah as dead as any of her prophets killed that day. So Elijah ran in fear for his life, ending up hundreds of miles away at Mount Sinai, where he hid out in a cave. Which is where he was when God asked, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

What he was doing was being completely demoralized and depressed, wanting to give up the prophet business, to lie down and die. Up on Mt. Carmel, he thought that he had shown Ahab who had the power, and instead it appeared that nothing had changed. The Royal Theology was still in charge back in Israel.

Elijah was a bit whiney with God: "I have been very zealous for the Lord of Hosts...but now I'm the only one left on your side, and they want to kill me." When God told him to get up and come out on the mountain because The Lord was about to pass by, Elijah couldn't even be bothered to do so – not for the great wind that broke the rocks, not for the earthquake, nor for the fire. What roused him at last was God's deep presence in the sound of sheer silence.

Then he went out on the mountain where God asked again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah repeated his same complaint and got an interesting answer. "You only imagine that you are so important as to be the only one left loyal to me. There are still seven thousand in Israel who have kept faith. Now get down from here and get back to my work. I have things for you to do."

The work, of course, was to continue to oppose the Royal Theology which claims to be in control of everything, including God. Every prophet who followed Elijah took up the same word: that the ruling empire is a meaningless idol which ultimately can only bring death. They preached that God alone offers hope for a

different future. That different future is what Jesus called The Kingdom of Heaven.

The church, as the body of Christ, inherits the role of witness to that kingdom. Our ministry is to proclaim that the Royal Theology in which we live is not actually able to give what we really need. This is a daunting task, since the ruling social/political/military powers-that-be certainly seem to offer everything they claim: the money, the legal system, the elite education, the good jobs, the standing army and even official prayer breakfasts.

The thing is that this whole complex reward structure is not actually giving us enough to live on. For those who are fortunate in reaping the gains set forth by the system, it can generate optimism and a limited sense of security. But as is quite clear at this moment, when things are fraying around the edges, it cannot create hope for a future of God's justice and shalom.

There have been times when the church has taken up the challenge of proclaiming God's opposition to the way things are – in the civil rights movement, in the opposition to the Vietnam war. But it's never been the whole body which engaged in these actions, and there was often significant disagreement within the church about whether we should, as the saying goes, "be involved in politics". Of course the idea that religion should not touch the political conveniently ignores those White House prayer breakfasts, and the fact that from the law of Moses onward God has always defined faith as being central to the organized life of the community – which is what politics is.

Still, I'm not intending, at least today, to preach a crusade for some particular action in opposition to the status quo. There are people in this congregation who are already involved in important public efforts – for decent housing, better transportation, the feeding of the hungry, coherent opposition to street violence. We support and join in when and where we are able. But the central issue before the church is not so much engaging in this or that action, although we might at times be called to do so.

Rather we are to be the body which both holds on to and embodies before the world the hope for God's future. Not easy to do that, when the concrete rewards of money, power, and fame offered by the Royal Theology seem so plausible. And in our noisy and ostentatious society, it is easy to imagine that a God who really wanted to compete with the dominant culture would show up in the shattering wind, the earthquake and fire. But we have a God who refuses to overwhelm our freedom to see and believe - or not.

So I would still put my money on the sound of sheer silence as being the place of truth, where we can be confronted with the call to keep on moving toward Kingdom of God, to witness to the deep hope that cannot be taken from us. If we will be quiet and listen, we, like Elijah, can receive the courage to keep on with our ministry of offering to the world the life that is worthy of the cost.