

Entering the Stone Timothy L. Carson

I Kings 9:7-9 February 25, 2018

In Hinduism, there is a phrase in Sanskrit – *Neti, Neti* – which means something like, “not this, not that” or “neither this nor that”. The word comes from a root word that means “not so.” And this phrase, neither this nor that, is integral to their thinking about what is real and what is not.

So often we are offered false dualisms: You have to choose either this or that. Politics and political parties are the absolute worst at this: It’s either this or that. To those false dualisms a good guru would shake his head and say, “Neti, neti.” Neither this, nor that.

And that is because the answer may be something between the two or something not yet considered. The answer may be that the answer has not yet arrived.

And this is a trap religious people fall into all the time: “Either this or that,” we say.

In a sense, we have a big case of Neti Neti in our story of the cowering Elijah. Life has not been good for our prophet. Life is often not good for prophets. He’s been meddling in religion and politics again and that turned out poorly for him.

Elijah had lambasted the president and the first lady for worshipping the wrong things – the gods of Ba’al. The back story is this: The president, Ahab, had married a foreigner, Jezebel, and she dragged all her religion and culture into the marriage and they got all entangled. Really it’s Jezebel’s false gods that are the problem.

As a result of all this Elijah challenged the priests of Ba’al to a little dual: They go up on top of Mt Carmel and have a little competition. The 450 priests of Ba’al are instructed to lay out their sacrifices on the ground and then call down fire from the heavens to consumer it. So they do and they dance and pray and cut themselves from morning to night but nothing happens. All the time Elijah is trimming his finger nails and saying things like, “Your god on a trip? Napping? Distracted with other things?”

When all of the first lady's priests collapse on the ground like whipped dogs it is Elijah's turn. He lays an altar of twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel, digs a deep trench all the way around it, stacks the firewood and puts the sacrificial beast on top. Then he calls in the Carmel volunteer fire department and tells them to hose it down real good. Then they did it a second time. The wood was so wet, there was so much water, that it drained off and filled the trench. Then Elijah looked to heaven and asked the Lord of heaven and earth to do it for every promise every made to the people. And the thing exploded into flames and that competition was over.

Doing things the gruesome Old Testament way he ordered all those 450 priests down into the valley where they were summarily executed. Do not try to do this at your own home.

Elijah brings President Ahab up on top to see just how badly it went for the priests of Ba'al and how good it had gone for Yahweh.

When the dejected president made the sad trip back to the palace to bear the bad news to Jezebel it was one of the worst days of his life. When she heard it she screamed a curse: "May the same thing happen to me if I don't make it happen to you by this time tomorrow!" It's a memorable curse that you should file away for some real stressed out time at the office.

And now the race is on. The dark queen and her orcs are in pursuit. Elijah runs for his life into the wilderness, all the way to Beersheba, and there he collapses under a tree and falls into a deep weary sleep. He is awakened by angelic beings who nourish him with bread and water, a communion scene in the wilderness. And then for all of you who make foreshadowing connections, he treks for forty days onward. Like Israel after the Exodus on the way to the promised land, wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, like Jesus in his great wilderness testing of 40 days before his public ministry begins, so Elijah crosses the wilderness of transformation for 40 days on the way to God. Like the 40 days of Lent.

When he arrived at Mt Horeb he climbed until he found a cave and took refuge there, sleeping the night. Somewhere in the dark echoes of that cave he heard a voice: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” If we hear the voice of God at all it so often comes as a question.

Adam wanders the cool of the garden, pretending to hide from God, and the question comes, “Where are you, Adam?”

Cain slays his brother Able and the voice of the Spirit asks, “Where is your brother?”

Jesus tells a parable about showing compassion to all who present themselves in need and the story shouts out a question: “When do you see God?”

The Spirit comes with one question after another and to Elijah also: “What are you doing, Elijah?”

Elijah misunderstands and tries to give an account of everything that has happened, like he was just filling God in.

Seeing that the prophet isn't getting it, Elijah is instructed to go to the mouth of the cave and prepare himself, because the Lord of the Universe is about to pass by and he shouldn't miss it.

But will he, can he recognize the Spirit when it appears? And that is the question, isn't it? Will we notice the Spirit and when and how? It's the old question for all of us: “How do you know God?”

Some of the old answers, the answers from another century, or from tradition, or from popular culture, or from our childhood don't work anymore, at least not for us. If you ask me to make a choice between certain notions of God or nothing I might choose nothing, because I can't accept that version. So allowing your concept of God, your perception of God to change is so very important. The only question, the hard question remains: To what?

The same dilemma faces Elijah as he stands at the mouth of his cave.

First came a devastating wind that blew with hurricane force. But God was not in the wind. Neti neti.

Next came an earthquake that shook the very foundations of the earth, causing all things to tremble. But God was not in the earthquake. Neti neti.

And then a raging fire that consumed every living thing in its path. But God was not in the fire. Neti neti.

God was not in the places you might assume God to be. God was not sheer force. God was not in dramatic demonstrations of power. God was not outside, something separate from Elijah himself. Neti neti, not this or that, neither here nor there.

So often we've been conditioned to look for certain things in certain places in certain ways and I believe that's why so many people find so little to attract them to the life of faith today.

It's not that God is dead or their love of God is gone. It's that they've been taught to look for God in certain places and ways, in the wind or earthquake or fire. "Looking for love in all the wrong places ..."
But ... neti neti. After the spectacle has passed, what's left? God was not in the wind; God was not in the earthquake; God was not in the fire.

After all the obvious display passed, the ways and places where one might assume God is found, something else appeared. After all that the only thing that was left was a *sound like sheer silence*.

After the yield from the sensory world disappoints us, the real treasure remains: The Hum of the Universe. Pure Being. Light. Darkness. Absolute Love. Existence. Nothingness. The Consciousness of the Cosmos and our Consciousness. The Sound of Sheer Silence.

At once Elijah knew he was in the presence of the sacred and holy, and he covered his face in his mantle. He covered his face with humility and awe.

And then he heard it again. Out of the silence came the same question as before: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” What are you doing here?

What are you doing here, Tim and John, Sarah and Sally? What are you doing here with your life? Why are you here and not someplace else? Why has your path brought you here? What are you going to do with where you are? Who are you now and who are you to become?

What are you doing here?

For Elijah his answer was a simple one: His work was not over, more life was yet to live, and dragons left to slay. Now that you’ve found the sound of sheer silence carry it with you like a precious stone and leave this place. You were destined to come here. You needed to come here. But now you are meant to go somewhere else or in a different way.

From time to time we are all meant to enter the dark cave of protection and revelation, the womb of new birth.

Out of that darkness we find the unexpected God and our true selves. And we are not meant to stay in the shadows forever, but only for a season.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
but I have promises to keep,
and miles to go before I sleep,
and miles to go before I sleep.

Robert Frost

Stopping by a Woods on a Snowy Evening