

When you get to raving in a cave

Hespeler, August 13, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

[1 Kings 19:9-18](#), Psalm 85:8-13, Romans 10:5-15, Matthew 14:22-33

Ladies and Gentlemen, we begin this morning with a special report on the state of the church. We take you live to the Prophet Elijah who is standing by to give us this vital information. Elijah, where are speaking from to us today?

Elijah's Report

Elijah: "Good morning, Scott, though I'm not sure how good it is. I am reporting to you live from this cave where I have hidden out because of just how bad things are.

"Look, I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts, but the people around here have forsaken God's covenant. The pews are empty, the church buildings are falling into disrepair. People are not giving as much. and the church is no longer automatically given respect in society.

"We don't get to just do whatever we want any more! And sometimes, when the church's pastors and preachers say things that the society around them finds to be intolerant, they get cancelled! People actually unfriend them on Facebook and unfollow them on Twitter.

"Why, these days, it is as if I alone am left, and they are seeking to cancel me too! So, I have come on this major television network to warn you all that they are not letting us have a platform anywhere! Beware! Beware!

"We're all doomed, I tell you, doomed! It is like they are trying to cancel God!"

Okay, Elijah, thanks for the report. Um, I think I'm going to talk to the head of the network about getting you a few mental health days, okay?

About Elijah's Complaint

I don't know about you, but when I read that famous story of Elijah in the cave recently, I couldn't help but make the connection between his thrice repeated complaint and what we often hear in the church these days.

Now, I want to be clear, of course, that, in the Book of Kings, Elijah's complaint is not entirely out of line. He actually has had his life threatened by a very powerful person – Jezebel, Queen of Israel. So, I can hardly blame the guy for feeling persecuted.

But let's just inject a bit of realism into his situation. The reason why Jezebel threatened him was because he just finished engineering the slaughter of 450 prophets of her God, Baal.

And I know, I know, as far as the Bible is concerned, Baal is a false god and his prophets are false prophets. But still, if Elijah just managed to pull that off, he can hardly be as powerless as he claims when he cowers and whines in his cave.

Is his problem really that belief and worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel is suddenly illegal? Or is it just that he is struggling with the reality that his religion no longer has the unrestricted power that he thinks it once had to impose itself on everyone and maybe kill those who don't go along with that? And is that really persecution, or is it just a loss of privilege?



It is enough to make me wonder if God, who must have had an understanding of the entire situation, was rolling his eyes at Elijah's complaint just a little bit?

Reminds me of Something

But there is so much in that – in all of that – that really reminds me of where we seem to be in the church in the world today. We seem to hear a lot of people complaining that the church just doesn't quite seem to be living up to what we think it should be. Across the board – on every part of the spectrum from left to right wing – the church seems to be struggling with its loss of power, influence and cultural clout. And often this is decried as a loss of religious freedom and even persecution.

And sometimes that makes me wonder, just like the story of Elijah does, whether the real thing we are decrying is not persecution so much as a loss of the privilege that we once enjoyed. Some of it is certainly about making a hard adjustment to living in a much more diverse society than we had been used to. Does God sometimes roll God's eyes at our complaints? Maybe.

God's Response

But, even if God might have been doubtful of some of Elijah's complaints, he still did respond to him with compassion and care, and I believe that God does the same for us. The truth of the matter is that, even when we are inclined to overreact and over complain, we still have a God who is ready to meet us where we are and respond to us as we need.

So let us take a look at how God responds to Elijah when he is really feeling at his lowest. The first thing I note is that God actually responds to Elijah in a variety of ways.

First of all, God responds through self-revelation. **“He said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.’”** Now, if you were to put yourself in Elijah's position for a moment, and you've just been promised a revelation of God, what kind of revelation would you be looking for? You would be looking for the revelation of a powerful God, wouldn't you – a God who would smash your enemies like a cosmic Hulk?

Not in the Wind

So, when Elijah was looking around for what was coming around the mountain to reveal God to him, I bet he was excited to see **“a great wind.”** Oh yes, here was the ticket. That was just the thing to destroy all of the people who were standing in the way of Elijah doing whatever he wanted, a wind **“so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces!”** Yes, surely God would show everyone who was boss with a mighty wind.

But, wait a minute, God wasn't in the wind. The wind just seemed to be stirring everything up and unsettling things. Surely God could use such power to remake the world just as Elijah wanted but was choosing not to do so!

Not in Earthquake or Fire

So, then Elijah looked around to see what else was coming around the mountain and it was an earthquake. “Ah, here it is, he sighed to himself, this is how God is going to shake up all my enemies. But, no, God wasn't in the earthquake either.

By the time the roaring fire came around the mountain, Elijah was not too surprised that God wasn't in that either.

The Silence

But then something very different started to come around that mountain. Elijah dismissed it at first because it really didn't seem to amount to anything. It certainly didn't seem to shake up or disturb anything. It didn't make any noise, in fact it was kind of the opposite of noise; it was the sound of sheer silence.

And then Elijah realized something and he was so shocked by his realization that I think he spoke aloud: "Oh, great, this is it, isn't it? God is going to come in the silence. How is silence supposed to smite anybody?" And with that he sighed, pulled his mantle around his face and stepped out to the entrance of the cave.

And so it was that God appeared to Elijah in the silence. And you would think that Elijah might have learned something from that mode of appearance.

Maybe this would finally make him realize that, when the world is not going in the way that you think it should, the proper response may not be to try and impose your will on the world with powerful displays of wind, earthquake and fire – that maybe, sometimes, when the world is not living up to your expectations, it might be time to stop and listen and maybe learn something in the silence.

Did Elijah Really Hear?

But no! As soon as Elijah realized that God had finally shown up, he repeated the exact same complaint with exactly the same whining tone: **"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."**

At this point, I assume, God just decided that this Elijah fellow was so committed to only seeing himself as the victim in this story that some other response was going to be needed. And so, we're told, God gave Elijah something to do. **"Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also, 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."**

And to all of you who are saying to yourselves, "Doesn't that sound nice, God is taking care of Elijah by giving him a friend, Elisha, to work alongside him," let me explain a few things.

What do these Tasks Mean?

This is not really a good and certainly not a comforting job that God is giving the prophet. He is to anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Who is Hazael? He is actually a usurper who is going to engineer a coup against his predecessor. Even worse, Hazael will build an empire that will invade and bring death and slaughter to many people in the kingdom of Israel. To anoint Hazael as king over Aram is to anoint an instrument of chaos, death and destruction to be unleashed on Elijah's own people!

And what about anointing Jehu as King of Israel? Well, he too will be a usurper who pulls off what is perhaps the bloodiest coup in the ancient history of Israel against his master, King Ahab. And, yes, Elijah is no fan of King Ahab, but the kind of chaos that Jehu's coup will create is not good news for anybody. The Prophet Hosea, for example, soundly condemns it in the name of the LORD.

And finally, Elijah is to anoint Elisha as his prophetic successor. Here and here only is there any measure of comfort for Elijah in some companionship, but the message that he receives in the moment is hardly comforting to anyone but Elijah as it is stressed that Elisha is being put into place to slaughter anyone who escapes the sword of Hazael or of Jehu.

If you Demand Action

So here is what I understand God saying to Elijah in this moment. If you are not going to find an answer in silence, reflection and listening, if you're going to demand action, then I am going to show you the cost of such action. If you want God to act in such a way as to bring about what you think is best, the result might just be a lot of chaos. So just be very careful about what kind of action you are asking for from God.

And then, after all of that, God gives one more response to Elijah that has got to be the most critical of all. All this time, what has Elijah been saying? He has been complaining to God that he and he alone has been trying to save God's reputation. Why, the way Elijah tells it, God is really lucky to have him because otherwise God would be completely destroyed by the opposition.

A Final Word

But God's final word to Elijah outside that cave tells a very different story, doesn't it? **"Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel,"** God says, **"all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."** In other words, God has been doing just fine without Elijah's help thank you very much. God doesn't need Elijah to save God or defend God's honour. God is quite capable of taking care of God's self and of those who are God's faithful followers.

I will admit that it can be rather hard these days to be a person of faith in this world. The things we once took for granted about our place and our voice in society are just no longer true. Like Elijah, we might feel like hiding out in some cave somewhere and whining "I alone am left."

God Meets you Where you are

And, on one level, I want to affirm that, if you are feeling like that, your feelings are valid. It is difficult to manoeuvre this world of change and uncertainty. I want to encourage you by assuring you that God will meet you wherever you are in your journey, even if it is hiding out in a cave somewhere.

But I would also encourage you, when God does meet you, to put yourself in a mind to listen. Perhaps God has been speaking, but you have not been hearing because God speaks in the silence, and you prefer to pay attention to the wind, earthquake and fire.

And above all, listen when God tries to tell you that you don't have to be the one to protect and take care of God's honour – that God can take care of Godself. That might just be the most freeing lesson that any of us needs to learn.