

19th Sunday 2015 1 Kings 19:4-8

The prophet Elijah might be the most mysterious figure in the scripture. Yet in his petulant and unredeemed qualities, he is a lot like us. He does amazing things, yet remains an enigma. We know nothing about his background. He simply appears at a difficult time in Israel's history. A time when the king, Ahab, was being influenced by his powerful wife Jezebel, leading people to false religion and bad values. Elijah appears, out of nowhere, to announce a drought. The drought represents the lack of spiritual nourishment in Israel.

Elijah did not accept the barrenness of this situation. He summons the prophets of Israel, all puppets of the weak king, to a contest on Mount Carmel. He uses the strange device of calling for fire from heaven. When the false prophets have no success, Elijah mocks them. "Your god is too busy to hear you, maybe he is tending to his own personal hygiene." There is a lack of refinement, a crudeness, in Elijah that is not attractive. He has rough edges.

He is also arrogant; he shows off. He digs a trench around his own altar, where a sacrificial calf lies, drenches the altar, and fills the ditch with buckets of water. The answer to his prayer must be extraordinary, you see. Then he begs God to send fire from heaven. To everyone's surprise, lightning strikes, licks up the water, and consumes the calf.

Elijah is not content with this victory. He has a vengeful streak. Instead of allowing the king's prophets to be convinced and converted to true religion, he and his assistants slaughter their opponents. Four-hundred-fifty are killed. A bloodbath, literal or figurative (we are more likely to enact the latter), never does anyone good. There is an uncompromising cruelty in this that horrifies us. Elijah is not a man of peace. So he experiences the backlash, which violence always brings.

He becomes an outlaw, a marked man. He pities himself. This is where we meet him in today's reading. He is on the run and feeling vulnerable. Perhaps this is where we can identify with him: headstrong and self-righteous, yet bewildered and isolated. His excesses, his arrogance, his mistakes, are catching up with him. But he is not ready to face reality and learn his lesson. He simply wants to whine. He indulges himself.

God is very patient with Elijah, as he is patient with us when we are immature. God doesn't impose himself; he invites us to gradually move towards enlightenment. That is why God sends his angel, who provides Elijah with food and coaxes him to eat it. Elijah is too busy giving up to see the point of this; he eats a bit, then lies back down. So the angel says, "Get up

and eat, or the journey will be too much for you.” Food, literal or figurative, is not meant so much to fill us, as to energize us, to give us the strength to move forward. The story really talks about sacramental food here. The Elijah story expands the idea of eucharist as manna; it is now “food for the journey.” The journey through life and beyond death.

In the strength of the food, Elijah travels forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, the mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments. This is like the Israelites moving forty years through the challenges of the wilderness, into the promised land. This is the place of enlightenment.

But Elijah’s enlightenment is different from that of Moses, which took the form of commandments. God reveals himself to Elijah cryptically and with subtlety. Instead of thunder and lightning and special effects, the clarity of laws, God reveals himself to Elijah in a still small voice. This takes time for Elijah to figure out. He is being pushed, as God pushes us, away from a simplistic mentality, into a place where God is more than an idea. He becomes a God who isn’t up there, like fire striking from heaven. He becomes a God in here, smoothing our rough edges, quietly transforming us, filling us with peace that behaves constructively.

This is a big change for Elijah, as it is for most of us. It allows him to negotiate challenges with less aggressiveness. It allows him to identify with the oppressed rather than being an oppressor himself—we see this in his reaction to the story of Naboth’s vineyard.

We do not witness the actual cleansing in the external story of Elijah. We see its effects. That is the meaning of the final episode of the saga, when Elijah ends his earthly career. Endings and beginnings are hard for most of us; in them we don’t have control over our lives. We must submit; we must accept. We grow most if we can accept God’s chastening correction as a blessing rather than punishment.

Elijah is famously and uniquely taken up to God by a chariot of fire in a whirlwind. It is not the way I would want to go. It seems painful and terrifying. Yet it is also appropriate to the brutality and willfulness of Elijah’s career. It is as if God is saying, “Dear child, if you want to be with me forever, your unintegrated qualities must be burned away.” Elijah, most uncharacteristically, shows himself to be a model of quiet, humble acceptance. There is no ill temper, there is no whining. Rather, he steps into the chariot, without taking the reins, and allows the fiery horses to bring him to God. He drops his mantle of power and authority, which he doesn’t need anymore, onto the shoulders of his successor Elisha. It is as if Elijah finally

understands the still small voice of God, and becomes able to let go of his own controlling and insistent qualities.

The epilogue to the Elijah story is the promise that he will return and lead us, his successors, to know God as closely as he did: this is declared explicitly on the last page of the Old Testament, in the book of Malachi. There is also the charming Jewish custom of leaving an empty chair at the yearly Passover celebration in case Elijah quietly stops in. For Elijah to be a quiet and deferential guest, not seizing center stage, is surprising. The empty chair reminds us that God usually doesn't reveal himself in spectacular and self-evident ways. He communicates in the still small voice. We must be quiet and very observant if we are to hear and notice, when God comes as a gentle guest into our lives.

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