Elijah: Bearing Witness at the End
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The first time we encounter Elijah, he is telling King Ahab that there will be neither dew nor rain except by his word. The last time we see Elijah, he being escorted by fiery horses and Chariots of Fire into a whirlwind and up into heaven. This same Elijah multiplies a jug of oil, raises a boy from the dead, and calls down fire from heaven on more than one occasion.

In today’s first lesson, we stumble into the last part of an Elijah story. It might be helpful to start a little earlier than the Elijah story and an end a little after the Elijah story to see today’s reading in full light. In today’s lesson, Elijah is given three tasks,

15 And the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. 16 And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. (1 Kings 19:15-16)

He is called to anoint two kings and a prophet. I am going to come back to these three tasks at the end, but let’s back up a bit to understand why the Lord is giving Elijah this assignment. To do this we need to look back to 1 Kings 16:23.

In the thirty-first year of Asa king of Judah, Omri began to reign over Israel, and he reigned for twelve years; six years he reigned in Tirzah. (1 Kings 16:23)

Omri was a military commander in Israel and when he comes to power, he establishes a powerful dynasty that will strengthen Israel economically and militarily. In some ways, Omri looks like the inverse of King David. He unites his people, he defeats the Philistines, and he builds a powerful ruling house. Unlike David, Omri “did what was evil in the sight of the LORÐ, and did more evil than all who were before him.”(1 Kings 16:25)

The stories of King Omri and his son King Ahab, are stories about the undoing of Israel. Hundreds of years earlier, when Joshua led the children of Israel across the Jordan and into Canaan, he defeated the gods on the land. His story might be understand as a war of YHWH against the idols of the land. These false gods and false religions dehumanized people in terrifying and oppressive ways. The campaign against the wicked and destructive forces in Canaan began with walls of Jericho falling down and the destruction of that great city.

After the battle, Joshua proclaimed, “Cursed before the LORÐ be the man who rises up and rebuilds this city, Jericho.

“At the cost of his firstborn shall he lay its foundation, and at the cost of his youngest son shall he set up its gates.” (Joshua 6:26)
Now hundreds of years later, King Ahab, son of Omri comes to power. He is even more evil than his father, and his wife Jezebeel actively seeks to replace all worship of YHWH with Baal worship. In the midst of this restoration of Baalism, the walls of Jericho are rebuilt. In 1 Kings 16:34, we read,

In his days Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the LORD, which he spoke by Joshua the son of Nun.

Baalism has a long and varied history and basically starts with worship of certain lands gods and eventually Baal is seen of the Lord of Thunder who regulates agricultural seasons and is a god of great and mighty power. This is not a moral religion, but a series of rituals used to invoke the power of this so-called god to bring rain and proper the crops. These rituals are filled with immorality, dehumanization, oppression, and all manner of evil.

They corrupt the understanding of God and the image of humanity and eventually lead to the destruction of civil society. With this in mind, we return to the strange tale of Elijah.

Baalism has taken hold in Israel. Jericho is being rebuilt. Canaan is returning to paganism. Then suddenly Elijah appears,

Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”

(2 Kings 2:4, 18-22)

Now imagine Moses standing before Pharaoh. He begins to call down judgment upon the various idols of Egypt through a series of plagues. Each plague reveals the powerlessness of the gods of the land. Like Moses, Elijah exposes the empty promises of Baal. By the word of His mouth the rain stops. Or as the St James tells us,

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. (James 5:17)

Now jump ahead to the third year, and Elijah confronts King Ahab and the prophets of Baal. The people of Israel gather at Mt. Carmel with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah for a battle between Baal and YHWH. Of course, you know the story, the prophets of Baal fail to set fire to their sacrifice. As was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until blood gushed upon them, but no fire, no voice, no god.

Then after soaking the altar in water, Elijah calls upon the Lord to send down fire from heaven and the fire of God consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, the dust and all the water. YHWH had won. Baal was exposed as empty and false. The prophets of Baal destroyed. And the rain of God blanketed the dry land.

This is a story of victory. It is what many Christians pray for and long for. “Please God, show yourself strong, expose the false gods of our land.” And yet, our story now takes an odd twist.
Jezebel exclaims to Elijah, “So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of the (killed prophets) by this time tomorrow.” (1 Kings 19:2) At this point, there is a slight confusion in our story, the ESV reads, “Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba.” (1 Kings 19:3) The Hebrew word translated “afraid” is most often translated as “saw” or “see.”

There has been some debate about translating this word as “saw” or as “fear” since the time of the Church Fathers. This has led many commentator and preacher, including myself, to suggest that Elijah in his weariness or something suddenly becomes afraid of death, but this reading is inconsistent with the overall story and with what happens next. It could be that fear and saw are both valid translations but not in the way we typically have rendered the story. Listen to St. Ambrose,

To be sure, it was not a woman that such a great prophet was fleeing, but it was this world. And it was not death that he feared, for he offered himself to the one that searched for him and said to the Lord, “Take my soul.” He endured a weariness of this life, not a desire for it, but he was fleeing worldly enticement and the contagion of filthy conduct and the impious acts of an unholy and sinful generation.

When Jezebel speaks, Elijah sees that Israel will not turn back from Baalism. In spite of the victory, the land and the people are under judgment. Like Pharaoh, Jezebel reveals the hardened heart that will not repent even in the face of miracles. Judgment is at the door. Elijah runs 100 miles away to Beersheba. Then he travels another day’s journey into the wilderness, and he tells the Lord that he is ready to die. Think of Jesus grieving as he looks at Jerusalem, knowing that the people will not repent but will crucify him instead. Elijah sees Israel under judgment. His ministry has failed. He is ready to come home to the Lord. Instead, the Lord strengthens him with food and tells him to eat for the journey ahead. Elijah eats and then travel 40 days and 40 nights with no food to the Mt Horeb or Mt Sinai.

Like Moses of old, Elijah holds conference with the Lord on Mt. Sinai. In spite of the miracles, in spite of the power, he declares, “the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant.” Three different times in the Elijah tale, he repeats that he is the only one left. It appears that Elijah believes that all the other faithful ones and prophets have been killed by this wicked nation.

The Lord gives Elijah his marching orders, and we’re back to the beginning of the story. Anoint Hazael King over Syria, Jehu, King over Israel, and Elisha as a prophet to replace you. Two kings and a prophet. These three will be instruments of judgment on Israel. Elijah will raise up Elisha. Elijah will anoint Hazael who will go to war with Israel. He will also anoint Jehu who will eventually kill Jezebel, all the house of Ahab, and all the prophets of Baal.

Eventually the nation will be destroyed and the survivors will be taken captive. But the Lord will preserve a group of people who will continue to worship the true God in exile. Elijah and Elisha will serve this remnant community who will be sustained in the midst of the judgment on Israel. Just a Elijah was cared for during the drought, this remnant will be dispersed to the four winds, but the Lord will sustain them, protect them, and prepare them for the day when Paul will travel the empire and bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the synagogues spread across the empire.
While there is much we can take away from the strange story of Elijah, I think I will simply pause over one thought. Elijah’s call was from the Lord and it would be fulfilled in ways that even Elijah couldn’t imagine. Eugen Rosenstock Huessy once said that the historical person dies to the present moment in order to change history. Elijah doesn’t see the fruit that he had hoped to see and yet God was working in Him and using Him to prepare a future generation.

There is so much in life and our calling that we don’t understand. We see evil abound and long for revival and restoration, and we should rightly pray for those things. At the same time, we know that our success in life are not determined by the amount we make, our accomplishments, our degrees, or even by the revivals we see. Our life is hid with Christ in God. Like Abraham, like Moses, like Elijah, we trust that God is faithful and fulfill His purposes in our lives. So in this moment, we trust Him, we walk in His love, and we worship in all that we say and do.

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