

Pentecost 11b, August 8, 2021

I Kings 19:4

“But he went a day’s journey into the wilderness, sat down under a solitary broom tree and asked that he might die: ‘It is enough, O Lord, take away my life. . .’”

Of all the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, Elijah is one of the most intriguing and is the one we hear about in today’s First Reading.

And he is both intriguing and famous, not only for his own particular character and actions but also because he is the “prototype” of prophets who came after him, including John the Baptist who is spoken of as Elijah who has come back from the dead--although, interestingly enough, the legend about Elijah is that he never died but was carried into the heavens in a fiery chariot: “Swing low, sweet chariot, comin’ for to carry me home. . .”

In addition, Elijah is the second of the two characters along with Moses who appears to Jesus in the Transfiguration story.

Any of those attributes would make him intriguing and fascinating-- but the reason Elijah is so fascinating to me is because he fits almost perfectly into the psychiatric category of someone who is bi-polar— or what we used to call “manic-depressive”—that is, someone who can be “on fire”, almost “driven” at times, incredibly high energy and enormously creative. . . and then, virtually overnight, can end up in a dark and depressing place. . . and for short or long periods of time, find themselves unable to muster the energy, interest, or will to do almost anything.

I mean, in the stories about Elijah, he is absolutely flying sometimes— going out of his way to confront and annoy King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and then, in the very next chapter, ends up in the dumps, alternating between floods of tears and petty demands, berating God unmercifully for having put Elijah into the dreadful position of being the only one left in all of Israel who is loyal to God. . .to Yahweh.

And today’s first reading is a perfect illustration of that two-fold personality.

For instance, just prior to the words we heard earlier, Elijah had successfully concluded the famous story of the “battle of the gods” on Mt. Carmel. And just in case you don’t remember it clearly or have never heard the story, let me fill you in on the details.

When the children of Israel finally arrived in the promised land—the land called “Canaan”—they bumped head on into the worship of a local fertility god named “Ba-al” or “Baal.”

Now, although Ba-al/Baal was #2 in the Canaanite hierarchy of gods,  
 because he held the fertility portfolio,  
     he attracted more than his share of followers.  
 After all, in an agricultural society, the fruitfulness of the land  
 was absolutely essential to the wellbeing of the residents.  
 And so, we can understand why the people naturally felt  
     that numerous offerings and sacrifices were required of them  
     if the land was to continue to be productive.

In addition, because so much time and energy was spent  
 on the planting and harvesting of figs and olives, grapes and grain,  
     spring and fall celebrations were particularly festive and lavish.  
     Abundant amounts of food and drink were consumed freely—  
     with the result that the worship of Baal often ended up  
     with so-called “religious” services at which the participants  
     had every one of their physical needs and wants satisfied. . .  
 and I mean EVERY want and EVERY desire.

In addition, given the fact that Yahweh—Israel’s God—  
 was a God of the desert and the wilderness  
     and was therefore perceived as very strict and demanding,  
     we can understand why the Israelites would end up “lusting” after Baal---  
     as it was so often described.

It is also understandable why King Ahab’s wife, Queen Jezebel—  
 Baal’s most vocal supporter and most enthusiastic press agent—  
     why she absolutely hated the prophet Elijah  
     who was always telling the people *ad nauseum*  
     to turn away from their worship of Baal  
     and turn back to the worship of Yahweh—Israel’s true and only God.

And this conflict between Elijah and Jezebel for the hearts and minds of the people of Israel  
 reached its climax on Mt. Carmel with a kind of contest between Yahweh and Baal  
     to see which of the two gods was most powerful, and therefore,  
     which of the two was real and to be worshipped.

The competition started early in the morning with the 450 prophets of Baal  
 pulling out all the stops to get their candidate to pour down fire from heaven  
     upon their sacrificial offering. . .and to do this, they went whole hog:  
     They danced around the altar until their feet were sore;  
     they made themselves hoarse shouting instructions and encouragement at the sky.  
 They even slashed themselves with knives, thinking that the sight of blood  
     would get things moving, but, for all the good it did them,  
     they could have saved themselves the trouble.

Now, Elijah, being the kind of person he was, couldn't resist  
throwing a little shade and getting in a few digs.

“Maybe Baal’s flown to Hawaii for the weekend,” he said.  
Or maybe he’s binge-watching all the seasons  
of “Midsommer Murders” he snickered out loud.

In the face of such taunts and insults, the prophets of Baal  
whipped themselves into an even greater frenzy, but by mid-afternoon,  
not only were they completely pooped out, but there was still no sign of fire.

**And then it was Yahweh’s turn.**

Now, although Elijah lived some 3000 years ago  
before the advent of television and the internet  
and major music festivals like “Woodstock” and “Lalapoolooza,”  
he knew how to package an extravaganza.

First, he rebuilt an old stone altar of Yahweh’s that had been torn down years before.  
Next, he ordered some of the spectators to dig a trench around the altar,  
and then, on top of the wood that he had placed on the altar,  
he laid the sliced-up pieces of the bull he had sacrificed to Yahweh.

And then, by means of a kind of “bucket brigade”, Elijah dowsed the offering thoroughly. . .  
and just as soon as he had finished doing it once, he did again. . .and a third time.

Now, I have to stop for moment here and tell you that it was at this point  
when I, as a young boy listening to this engrossing and dramatic story—  
when I suddenly realized that stories like this  
aren’t meant to be taken as factual. . .as literally true.  
I mean, here are they on top of Mt. Carmel  
dumping pails or pots or jars of water on the sacrifice—  
water that was only available in a river way down at the bottom of the mountain.

And so, how could someone—even a number of people—  
go down and fill their containers and then trek back up the mountain  
only to dump their load and return again to the river. . .  
and do all of that before nightfall.  
And just where did all those pails, pots and jars come from?

In other words, stories like this, found in many places in the Hebrew Scriptures,  
are intentionally and quite-rightly “exaggerated” to make a point—  
the point being the resulting display of the majesty, might,  
and awesomeness of Yahweh . . .the one who self-identifies as “I AM”. . .  
or, literally in Hebrew, the verb “I AM WHO I AM” or “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE”.

Anyway, to return to the story: By the third go-round, not only was the trench overflowing but the whole place was awash in water. . .

and Elijah himself looked as if he just stepped out of the shower.

And then, giving Yahweh the word to strut God's stuff,

Elijah jumped back just in time to see a bolt of lightning flash and crackle. . .

and moments later, with the water in the trench fizzing like spit on a hot stove. . .

nothing was left of the offering and the wood but a pile of ashes. . .

and a smell like that of a recently-exploded fireworks display.

So excited and impressed were the spectators that, at a signal from Elijah, they completely demolished the losing team right down to the last false prophet—which I should say is one more of those descriptions of God's actions that can not only turn our stomachs at the violence but also turn a whole lot of people off today, leading them to wonder if that Old Testament God was. . .or is. . .as good and kind, as compassionate and loving as Jesus was. . .or is.

Regardless, you can imagine how Jezebel reacted when she got wind of the news, and you can imagine why Elijah fled and why he complained aloud that his life wasn't worth a plugged nickel anymore. . . and just what did God have in mind to do about that.

But, you know, it's a funny thing about God.

God doesn't always seem to care much about whether or not we are unhappy with the tasks given us.

Instead, claiming that nobody was ever promised a rose garden,

God simply gives us another duty to perform—

which is exactly what Elijah didn't want. . .but is exactly what Elijah got.

And the task or case God put on Elijah's desk was the sordid affair of Naboth's vineyard.

You see, near King Ahab's palace was a vineyard that Frederick Buechner describes as "so fertile and productive that King Ahab could almost taste the pleasure of owning it."

But when the owner of the vineyard, a local wine-maker named Naboth refused to sell it to the king or even swap it for some land elsewhere—

Ahab went into a king-sized sulk and, like a little child,

pouted for several days. The Bible puts it this way:

"Ahab laid down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat."

Well, as far as Jezebel was concerned, this was exactly the kind of opening she had been waiting for. "Are you a man or a mouse?" she asked her husband.

"A king or a crumbled cookie?"

And when her wimpy spouse gave no answer, Jezebel took over and took charge.

Faster than you can say “She sells sea-shells down by the seashore”,  
 Naboth was found guilty of some trumped-up charge, stoned to death  
 as punishment for his fabricated crime. . .and Ahab got his vineyard.  
 Needless to say, he also got a visit from Elijah—  
 a not-unexpected one either because, down through the years,  
 Ahab and Elijah had often banged heads  
 and ended up meeting face-to-face.

As Buechner describes it:“Ahab would arrive at the meeting disguised,  
 wearing dark glasses and a false moustache—while Elijah,  
 sporting a 10-day growth of beard, would roar up on his Harley.  
 Ahab would address Elijah in his usual informal way  
 describing him as a ‘royal pain in the. . .neck’ . . .  
 and Elijah would let Ahab have it right back firing both barrels at the same time.”

On this occasion, however, it was a little different.  
 This time Elijah told him that when God was through with Ahab,  
 there wouldn’t be enough left of him to scrape off the sidewalk. . .  
 and what there was, the wild dogs would take care of.  
 And, as far as Jezebel was concerned, Elijah said,  
 she would end up the same way. . .and not only because of Naboth, either,  
 but also because of her opposition to Yahweh and her support of Baal.

Hearing this death sentence, Ahab expresses sorrow over what he has done  
 and, Elijah, believing that his apology was genuine,said that God  
 would allow Ahab to die honourably in battle. . .which happened. . .  
 and the part about the dogs only came true insofar as  
 they got to lap up the water used to wash off Ahab’s bloody chariot.

Jezebel , on the other hand, continued unrepentant and stubborn to the end  
 which, for her, came brutally and ruthlessly 10 years later  
 when her servants threw her out of a second-story palace window. . .  
 and when the dogs got finished with her, the story says,  
 all that was left for the funeral director to pick up  
 was her skull, her feet and the palms of her hands.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake” I can hear you thinking or murmuring,  
 “what is the point of telling us this gruesome story?”  
 Well, I guess one point is, as St. Paul says in Ephesians 5:  
 “Be careful how you live. . .because what you sow is what you will reap.”  
 In other words, don’t fool around with God because while God will forgive you. . .forgive us. . .  
 for sins we have committed, God will not spare us the consequences of those sins—  
 the humiliation, pain or suffering that comes as a result of our sinful actions.  
 And, if you don’t believe St. Paul, then just ask Ahab or Jezebel  
 who will confirm the truth that there is no such thing as a “free lunch”.

Second, as Elijah put it in his complaint to God that we heard in this morning's First Lesson:  
 "He went a day's journey into the wilderness, sat down under a solitary broom tree  
 and asked that he might die: 'It is enough, O Lord, take away my life. . .'"

To Elijah, and to all of us who sometimes get down in the dumps over what happens to us  
 for either very good reasons or for no good reasons at all, I would like to say,  
 in the words of that immortal Casey Stengel: "It ain't over 'til it's over."

In other words, when we feel as though we are confused or depressed. . .  
 or when we feel as though everything has come unglued and unstuck  
 or that we are absolutely at the end of our ropes. . .  
 and there's not a knot to be seen anywhere--  
 just remember that, for God, when something comes to an end or dies,  
 it invariably means that something else, something new,  
 is about to begin. . .is about to be born.

As the medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich, put it  
 in referring to those hard times and their eventual end:  
 "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and every manner of thing shall be well."  
 My riff on that affirmation is. . .and I suspect Elijah would agree:  
 "In the end, all shall be well. . .and if all is not well now, then this is not the end."

So, when things are really tough in your life and you begin to think  
 that even God cannot possibly snatch victory from the jaws of this defeat,  
 or bring anything good out of this present difficulty. . .  
 or create enough light to dispel this darkness. . .  
 or help us find a new beginning in this time of ending—  
 just remember, as Elijah found out, that, to God, nothing is impossible . . .  
 and, even more, that with God, all things are possible. . .including  
 that most unlikely of all divine promises heard in today's Gospel reading:

"I am the Bread of life, the living bread that came down from heaven;  
 and whoever eats of this bread will live. . .forever."

Amen.           SDG