

Semper reformanda
1 Kings 19:1-18

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1 Kings 19:1-18 (RSV)

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had slain all the prophets with the sword. ² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." ³ Then he was afraid, and he arose and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. ⁴ But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree; and he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers."

⁵ And he lay down and slept under a broom tree; and behold, an angel touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat." ⁶ And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank, and lay down again.

⁷ And the angel of the LORD came again a second time, and touched him, and said, "Arise and eat, else the journey will be too great for you." ⁸ And he arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. ⁹ And there he came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." ¹¹ And he said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. ¹³ And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." 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 Abelmeholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. ¹⁷ And him who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay; and him who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay. ¹⁸ Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Many of you may never have experienced war. Maybe some of your ancestors have known war. But, you've certainly heard about war. Today, you can't hear the news without hearing about war whether it's in Iraq, or Syria, or Libya, or Afghanistan, or the Congo, or Sudan, or South Sudan, or the Ukraine.

And these are wars just like the first wars of human history: they are civil wars. Wars between brothers and families, or people of the same religion but different viewpoints. Western Europe -- Christian Europe! -- has known war, really civil war, throughout its history as family dynasties, called monarchies, and their empires fought against brothers, or cousins, or simply people of the same religion who had a different viewpoint. In fact, some of you may be here today because you or your parents or grandparents fled civil wars in Europe or elsewhere. I am also pretty sure that in the future, this city, and perhaps this church, will welcome many who come here fleeing civil wars in their own lands.

That shouldn't surprise us. The world has never known anything but war, especially civil wars. This is human history since the days of Adam and Eve. The first child, Cain, killed his brother Abel. Esau and Jacob almost killed each other, and Jacob's 12 sons were constantly squabbling, even seeking to kill each other as they almost did with Joseph. After Israel entered the Promised Land of Canaan and fought successfully against the natives of the land, the Canaanites and the Philistines, once they were victorious they went right back to fighting against each other, exactly as the British and French brothers did, once they had successfully conquered the natives of North America.

Occasionally a powerful leader would rise up and knock heads together to bring peace. David was such a leader. But, David brought peace between brothers by threatening them. Yes, I know: David is pictured in the Bible as the beloved of God, the great writer of the Psalms. But don't forget: the Bible also presents him as he was: a ruthless Middle Eastern ruler whose first action upon taking Jerusalem, the enemy city, from the Canaanites was to kill all the blind and the lame. And he did the same in order to bring peace to his land amidst the squabbling brothers. David wasn't even allowed by God to build the Temple because of all the blood on his hands.

You might, say, maybe that was necessary. After all, David was God's chosen vessel to purify Israel because he was pure, because he was holy. Perhaps. But don't forget: David was the father of the the great, wise king Solomon, but who was Solomon's mother? Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, a great soldier whom David had killed so he could hide his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. Even Solomon, who continued his father, David's, wars and one who is presented in the Bible as the paragon of wisdom, had 700 wives and 300 mistresses, most from pagan religions. When Solomon was a mature, older man who should have known better, these wives and mistresses led him away from the Lord God to their own gods (1 Kings 11.3-4).

Our reading today takes us to the time shortly after Solomon had abandoned God and died, when the people of God were torn asunder between the sons of Solomon, now consumed by civil war, with one group setting up camp in the south, in the land of Judah, and the other in the north, and calling themselves Israel. The sundering of Israel led to battles between Israel and Judah in which thousands of God's people were killed as battles raged over the same parcels of the Holy Land, much as what happened in World War I as Germans fought Allies over the same few hundred feet of land in Europe. But Israel's battles went on not for 4 years as in Europe's Great War but for a thousand years! And in fact, they are still going on today, aren't they, as Israelites, and Palestinians, and Egyptians, and Syrians of various sorts squabble over the land of Israel.

But also like today, Israel in the day of Elijah suddenly faced a terrifying new enemy to the north. His name was not Saddam Hussein, or Moammar Gaddafi, or Bashar al Assad but Asshurnasirpal, king of the great Assyrian empire. You've probably never heard that name, have you? But he was cut from the same cloth as the present day, blood-thirsty men who rule by absolute power.

Faced with such an enemy the first thing the men of Israel did was momentarily stop fighting their civil war against each other to consider how to defend themselves against this huge enemy to the north. To defend Israel, the king of Israel, whose name was Omri, made peace with his brothers in Judah by marrying one his daughters to the son of the king of Judah to create an alliance, exactly as Christian kings and princes of Europe were to do centuries later, creating alliances to fight off worse enemies than their brothers in France or England or Italy.

But Omri also realized that he needed to do more than just stop fighting with his brother Israelites in Judah. He also needed external allies to help shore up Israel's defences. So, Omri also married his son, Ahab, to Jezebel, the daughter of the king of one of the greatest powers of the day, Tyre, in present day Lebanon. An alliance with Tyre promised Israel not only help against the Assyrians, but also great commercial possibilities, endless access to food supplies, and wealth beyond Israel's imagination. As a result of this marriage, commerce picked up in Israel and also in Judah. Times were good. And when times are good, the

people are happy. Omri essentially announced to the people what Chamberlain would announce to the people of England: We have peace in our day. You can thank me. And the people did.

But, Tyre was a pagan land. And Queen Jezebel was no shy, little princess. She was a missionary zealot for her pagan gods. She brought with her into Israel all of her people's gods. She, and the traders who came with her, began to build temples to Baal and places of pagan worship in Israel. The people of Israel were content to let her do so. After all, the gods of Tyre had made it the great metropolis of the Mediterranean, so perhaps they could do the same for Israel.

And so, like Solomon, who was swayed from God by his wives and mistresses, the people of Israel were swayed from the worship of the God of Israel to the gods of Tyre by the peace and prosperity that these gods seemed to bring.

Now, let me pause for a minute and remind you that while you may never have experienced war, you have experienced peace and prosperity, and you know how compelling they are, even able to draw people away from God by getting them to focus on their fields, their homes, their cars, their future pensions... not remembering the God who is actually ensuring these things.

Israel's peace and prosperity were false. What Israel was experiencing was actually a slow-working poison like all false beliefs. Like the frog in the slowly heated water, Israel didn't realize what was happening until it was too late. After all, the wine was flowing and the people were happy. Who could be upset? Why would anyone be upset, if everyone's happy, and there's peace?

And that's where Elijah comes in, a figure so eerie and so awe-inspiring that he stands out in the pages of Scripture, along with his disciple Elishah as something completely out of the ordinary.¹ He was a man of the desert, a melancholy, lonely figure dressed in a mantle of fur intended to show that he was always dressed for battle. In fact, he would appear as if by magic wherever battles were to be fought in the Lord's name against the enemies of Israel.² And for Elijah, the greatest enemy facing Israel was not its brothers in Judah, nor even the horrible Assyrians to the north, but the poison in the wells of Israel that Israel's own king Ahab had allowed his wife Jezebel to inject. And he brought the battle to Ahab and Jezebel's door.

The greatest battle of Elijah's life takes place just before the reading from this morning. On Mount Carmel, Elijah confronted Jezebel's pagan priests head on. He showed the people of Israel that it was God the Lord who was the true power, not the gods of Tyre, Baal and his other gods. And when he was victorious, Elijah ordered all the prophets of Baal to be executed in a bloodbath. But, he knew that the war wasn't over until the source of the poison, Ahab and Jezebel, were dead. Both Ahab and Jezebel also knew what Elijah knew and so they let him know either they or he would be killed, but killing there would have to be.

Which brings us to the reading for today. Fleeing for his life, Elijah was suddenly afraid. Have I made a mistake? Yes, I've seen God work, but now my own life is in danger? You might think that Elijah would have no doubts after what had happened, but that's one of the things that you must learn this morning: Elijah believes that bringing about reformation in Israel is all up to him. Oh, yes, reformation has to happen. But, who is going to bring it about? In Elijah's mind, he is the last hope of Israel, it all boils down to his great, pious works. Who will save Israel? Elijah knows the answer: I alone am left, oh Lord. I am the last pure one in Israel. Really?³

So, God shows him something and tells him something, something that Elijah doesn't fully understand but that you and I must so that we don't end up continuing to fight civil wars against each other but instead bring life to a devastated, bloody world.

God tells Elijah that, like Moses, he is not going to see the end of the story. But, before he dies, Elijah is going to leave this wilderness and its safety, and he is going to go back to the battle. Elijah: "The first thing that you are going to do is go to Damascus, capital of Israel's enemies. There you are going to anoint Hazael as king. Then you are going to return to Israel and you are going to anoint Jehu to be king instead of Ahab. Finally, you are going to go find Elishah and you are going to anoint him to be your successor to continue the battle. You're not going to see how this battle ends, but I can tell you how it will end: Syria under Hazael will defeat and kill Ahab and many of his soldiers. Jehu, the new king of Israel, will kill everyone in Ahab's house who escapes the sword of Hazael. And Elishah, your successor, will kill any of the poisoners of Israel who remain. It will be yet another bloodbath. Elijah is sure this is the way it is supposed to be.

And as if to confirm it, God appears to show Elijah what will happen. There in the wilderness, as Elijah looked out confused and fearful from his cave, he saw a strong wind rending the mountains. Aha, thought Elijah: that's God. Then he felt the ground

¹John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 246.

²John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 246.

³In spite of Elijah's false pride in his own works, God ministers to him in his very real fear for 40 days and nights, while he was hungry.

shake as an earthquake destroyed everything around that was left. Aha, thought Elijah: more of God's work. Then, he saw a fire ravaging all the rubble that was left on the earth, after the wind and after the earthquake. Aha, thought Elijah that's it: fire will destroy what the earthquake has left after the devastation of the tornado: first Hazael, then Jehu, then Elijah. Yes, thought Elijah: this is God at work at his reforming best. He has asked me to go and anoint those who will finally purify the land of Israel of the polluters and poisoners, even if it means creating a waste-land to do so.

But Elijah was wrong. Oh, yes, what happened was just what God showed Elijah. But Elijah was wrong in thinking that this was God's goal, to purify by destroying. What Elijah thought was what the Taliban and ISIS think when they create a waste-land by their bloodbaths and devastation in order to purify the land so that Allah can pick up the few who are pure who are left. Elijah was as wrong as Jesus' followers, James and John, when they asked Jesus whether they should call down fire on a town that had refused to accept Jesus. Elijah thinks that only the pure like him can purify the world of the impure, and that if we go throughout the land removing everyone who is impure or immoral or unjust, usually by eliminating them, the world will be cleansed. And who will be left? Why me, of course, Elijah says. I'll be the only one left. This is the zeal of the reformer. This is why reformers are so dangerous if they think that they alone are sufficiently pure to carry out God's work.

If Elijah or Jesus' followers had understood the vision, however, they would have heard what Scripture tells you and me, that God was not in the wind; God was not in the earthquake; God was not in the fire. God was in a still, small voice -- literally, a whisper -- that followed. What God is doing seems so harmless, so innocent, that it seems almost impossible. Scripture tells us that what will cleanse and purify the land is not wars which will one day cease when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ, the still small Word of God that penetrates deeper into man than any sword possibly can, entering the human mind and the human soul. Only through this Word can the poison of sin that has sickened all humanity and led it into civil wars from the beginning of time be sucked out, and taken away, being replaced by fresh, living water that brings life. Yes, wind, and earthquake, and fire will happen, but God is in the still small voice which will eventually be heard most perfectly in the mouth of one who had no earthly power about him to make him comely or powerful, one upon whom people looked and thought "can anything good come out of this?" yet one who spoke and people's lives were changed, the Word become flesh.

Yes, I know, war, like natural disasters, sickness, famine, accidents, ending of relationships, may sometimes be God's way of pruning his people. Scripture says that. But, be careful, my friends, that you don't end up like Elijah, thinking that it's up to you to be the sword of God in our day because you are pure enough, or reformed enough, and there is no one like you. For there is no one who is pure enough, or reformed enough, save one. We are all in need of being purified, being reformed, including Elijah and the disciples of Jesus, who had to learn a much more important lesson than the obvious one that God cares enough about his people to prune them, even till it hurts. Elijah had to learn that God's final goal was not to hurt, not to punish, not to cause destruction, not to create a wasteland. God's final goal was to bring life, and God would do that not through violence but through a simple voice, a little word, which as the great Martin Luther wrote, could even fell the devil himself when it was spoken.

One still small voice. One little word of God. This is the word that has always been at work in the world and still is, always bringing about a true purification of humans created in the image of God, always reforming as Karl Barth said, *semper reformanda*, always bringing life to the world not by taking life but by the giving of one life, once and for all, by which God has mercy on all through his own blood not ours. Thanks be to God.