

Date: March 19, 2006

**SUNDAY:** Lent 3

**SERMON: The Longest Journey: From Fugitive to Pilgrim**

Text(s): 1 Kings 18-19

© 2006 L. R. Kalajainen

Many words have been written in editorials, magazine articles, journals, and books, not to mention those spoken by television and radio pundits about the reasons why the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were so shocking to Americans and so lasting in their impact on our society. But at least one of the reasons, I believe, is that we in the West, and particularly in America, find it difficult to fathom that anyone in today's world could care enough about the honor of God to be willing to die or to kill for it. Although such notions were prevalent in the Middle Ages and beyond, at least since the Enlightenment, Western culture and society have evolved to the point, where the notion of fighting or killing for our faith seems alien and revolting to us. We may be willing to kill or to die in self-defense, or in defense of what we hold to be fundamental human rights, or in defense of a neighbor or ally who is attacked, or against a tyrannical dictator, but we won't kill for God. Not any more. We've moved beyond that. Or so we tell ourselves. And among all the other reasons, that is one reason we're so shocked by the violent actions of Islamic jihadists. We can't imagine taking God that seriously in our modern world.

Yet, as Karen Armstrong, in her book *The Battle for God*, has so powerfully argued, it is precisely fear of our secularizing modernity that is at the root of all Christian, Jewish, and Islamic fundamentalisms. Whether such fundamentalism turns violent depends on many factors, but fear of modernity and its loss of emphasis on God as the ultimate reality is always in the mix.

In order to fully appreciate the story of Elijah's struggle to uphold the worship of the God of Israel as the only true and living God, we'll have to stretch our imaginations a bit in order to appreciate as much as possible the

mentality that sees the question of God's reality as a question worth killing or dying for. As the struggles in which we are engaged in our contemporary world make clear, the issue has not gone away.

As we've already seen in the past two weeks, in Elijah's campaign against King Ahab and his queen Jezebel's modernizing and politically-expedient advocacy of religious pluralism, he appears to have had some trouble distinguishing between his own word and God's word. He's had a tendency to speak and act on his own, while assuming that he's speaking and acting for God

It's in the rest of the story as we've heard it today that Elijah's education in discerning the relationship between his word and will and God's word and will comes to its climax.

Our story today begins with God sending Elijah to Ahab to announce the end of the drought. There's no suggestion that Elijah's curse and the resulting three-year drought have caused Ahab or Jezebel to change their minds about encouraging the worship of the Canaanite deities Baal and Asherah. I'd guess that in Elijah's own mind, he figured that Ahab and Jezebel would come to their senses, repent and get rid of these false gods, and then God would lift the drought. But there's no suggestion that either Ahab or Jezebel were inclined to repent or change their ways. Nevertheless, God chooses to lift the drought anyway. "Go to Ahab," God says, and tell him it's going to start raining again."

Now, I can't imagine this was a particularly congenial assignment for Elijah, can you? Ahab hasn't repented. If God relents on the curse Elijah has pronounced, then what incentive will Ahab have for getting rid of the altars to the Baals? Elijah will just feel, and probably look, like a fool. He'll lose face. He still doesn't get it. He doesn't get that God, the God whose honor he is so keen to defend against all rivals, is a gracious God, even to those who do not care for God's honor. It's God who initiates an end to the suffering that Elijah's curse has imposed. It's

God who says, “Enough of this; it’s going to start raining again.”

But, for all his tendency to confuse his will with God’s, he does listen to God, and so off he goes to Ahab to deliver this news that is very good news for everyone but him. And since he’s the Elijah we’ve come to know and love, he can’t resist the opportunity to still work it out the way he thinks it ought to happen. He’s not going to let King Ahab think that the rains have just come again naturally because of some freak change of climate. Again, on his own initiative, with no suggestion that God has asked him to do it, he stages a dramatic contest between himself and the 800 prophets of Baal and Asherah on the summit of Mt. Carmel. He’s going to take them all on singlehandedly in a spectacle to end all spectacles—a dramatic duel of the deities—sort of a 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C. biblical version of *Survivor*.

I’ve already summarized the highlights of the story so there’s no need to go through it all again. The winner of the contest would be the one whose god answered by sending fire from heaven to consume the carcass of the sacrificial bull. “*Let the god who answers by fire be God,*” Elijah said. It’s a very dramatic story, and this afternoon when the choir sings the voices of those prophets of Baal calling on their god, you’ll hear how Mendelssohn captures that drama in his music.

After the failure of the prophets of Baal to call down the divine fire to consume the sacrificial bull, Elijah deliberately goes low-key. Not for him any wild, orgiastic prayers like those of his opponents, cutting themselves with knives and dancing around in a frenzy. With almost a deliberate absence of any pomp or circumstance, he simply prays, “*O Lord, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant and have done all this according to your will.*” I think he might have been better off with just the first half of that prayer, don’t you—“let it be known that you are God in Israel?” It probably wasn’t all that important for the people

to know who Elijah was as long as they got it straight who God was. But that bit of self-promotion in Elijah’s prayer holds the key to understanding where this story is going. And again, we see how God honors Elijah’s word, even when Elijah is acting on his own initiative. In response to this simple, if somewhat self-aggrandizing prayer, the lightning bolt from heaven fell. It fell on the sacrifice and consumed it, it consumed all the firewood, it fell on the water in the trench around the altar and licked it all dry. It was an all-consuming, cleansing, purifying fire of God, and when the people of Israel saw it, they fell on their faces in terror and repented and said, “*The Lord is God, the Lord is God.*”

Certainly Elijah could not have hoped for a more convincing demonstration that the God of Israel was indeed a living God. But here, at the moment of his greatest achievement, Elijah makes a fatal error. He forgets that up there on Mt. Carmel, amid all the drama and the terror of revelation, it was God’s honor, not his, which was at stake. Not satisfied with this stroke of divine lightning, Elijah then, again without any suggestion that God has asked him to do this, orders that all 800 prophets of Baal and Asherah be rounded up and slaughtered on the spot. Talk about running up the score on the losing team! I’m reminded of William Barclay’s somewhat simplistic, but memorable, observation about these stories of religiously motivated killings in the Old Testament. Before Christ came, Barclay said, when people thought they heard God telling them to destroy all God’s enemies, they did. Literally. They slaughtered them as Elijah did. But Jesus demonstrated that the way God destroys enemies is to transform them into friends through sacrificial love.

Elijah hasn’t learned that yet, obviously. So zealous was he for his cause, that he forgot whose honor was really at stake here; he also forgot that prophets are without honor in their own land. He forgot that kings and queens don’t

usually take mortal insults lightly. So instead of having Ahab and Jezebel groveling at his feet in repentance, he's faced with their promise that within 24 hours, he will be a dead man.

Some of us may remember the old American TV show back in the late 50's "The Life of Reilly." Remember Reilly's famous line when his crazy schemes inevitably went wrong? "What a revoltin' development this is!" Well, Elijah has his own "revoltin' development," as I suspect, most of us have. Within hours of his greatest triumph, he finds himself a fugitive. Elijah flees from Ahab and Jezebel like a whipped dog with its tail between its legs. He heads out into the Judean desert and finally sits down under a broom tree and has a dramatic pity party for himself. "*It is enough, O Lord, now take away my life, for I am no better off than my ancestors.*" (If you come to hear the oratorio this afternoon, you'll hear the bass soloist Robert Honeysucker sing that statement as an aria, one of the most memorable in the whole work.) What he's really saying is what St. Teresa of Avila said many centuries later during one of her own pity parties, "*God, if this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them.*"

We probably shouldn't be too hard on poor old Elijah here. Which of us hasn't indulged in a pity party from time to time, and probably for far lesser reasons than Elijah did? His discouragement is understandable, isn't it? Given his performance on Mt. Carmel, wasn't it natural for him to expect the nation to rise up and reform itself and turn away from the unreal gods to the one living God of Israel? But they didn't. The worship of the Baals just kept rolling right along, and he, the man of God, is a fugitive from the queen's wrath. An 18th century saint said that all discouragement is disenchanting egoism. In Elijah's case, and probably ours as well, that has the ring of truth about it.

But God doesn't allow his disgruntled prophet to enjoy his pity party for very long. There under the broom tree Elijah is finally

brought to bay by the Hound of Heaven. He begins to undergo a transformation from a fugitive into a pilgrim. His well of self-pity hasn't yet run dry, but a fundamental shift in direction occurs. When he wakes up he discovers that God has graciously provided him with food and God's messenger tells him it's to give him the strength he needs, because God is sending him on a journey back to the real source of his and every prophet's revelation and authority—back to the mountain of God, Mt. Sinai, where God had first revealed the divine moral law to Moses. When he continues his journey from the broom tree, he's no longer a fugitive fleeing from someone or something; he's a pilgrim. Pilgrims are people who travel with a purpose. They have a destination. They're not running from something, but journeying toward something. They're not perfect or heroic figures; they just have a goal greater than their own ego-needs, and they are determined to get there.

Elijah is still depressed, still pitying himself when he gets to Mt. Sinai, but at least he gets there. When he arrives, he takes refuge in a cave, still moaning about how he's the only one in all Israel who's still faithful to God. But it's there that his transformation from a fugitive into a pilgrim is completed. God calls to Elijah, "*What are you doing in that hole in the ground Elijah? Come out where I can see you, or more accurately, where you can see me.*" So out of his hiding place Elijah comes, and stands on the ledge at the cave's mouth. As he teeters precariously on the edge of the abyss, he is first buffeted by a whirlwind, then shaken by an earthquake, and finally terrified by a fire, but in none of these experiences does he discover the presence and power of God. Rather, it's after the wind and the earthquake and the fire that he hears the voice of God in what our translation renders as "*a sound of sheer silence.*" (The older translation, which we'll hear in the music this afternoon, is "*a still, small voice.*" I think I like the newer translation even better— a sound of

sheer silence! It powerfully suggests how we hear the true voice of the Spirit of God, doesn't it? This revelation to Elijah suggests that all our disenchanting egoism, all our self-pity, all our fears which make us fugitives have to be brought to a point of stillness and silence, where, like Elijah, we're standing there on the cliff's edge before God with no place left to run to and no other sound than the pounding of our own hearts. When we get quiet enough, still enough, when we cease from our own striving to control events, to manipulate or dominate others by the force of our will, then the voice of God comes to us in the silence. Only when Elijah reaches the point where all his attention is focused on that voice that speaks in the sound of sheer silence, is God able to complete Elijah's transformation from a fugitive into a pilgrim. Only then does God send him on his pilgrim journey back to Israel into the thick of national politics in order to bear witness to God's reality and grace, and to expose the follies of worshiping false gods. And God promises him company in that mission; contrary to Elijah's perceptions that he's the only faithful one left, God gives him an assistant, Elisha, to be a prophet-in-training, and says, "*There are seven thousand others who have not yet bowed their knees to Baal.*"

For me, these stories about Elijah are a cautionary tale. On the one hand, they challenge me to reexamine our modern tendency to relativize God into nothing more than the projection of our own inner subjective experience. In other words, they make clear the folly of idolatry, whether it be the worship of the nature gods like the Baals or the worship of the ideological, political, and economic gods of our own day. But they also warn us against confusing our own honor with God's, our own agendas with God's. They call us to active engagement in the affairs of our day, while at the same time warning us against getting sucked into the value system of the popular culture or the power games that nations play. There is a

mission in which God is calling us to engage. God doesn't call us to fight or destroy those who do not know or acknowledge God's reality and power. Rather, God calls us into community with other pilgrims, others who heed the call of the voice that speaks "in the sound of sheer silence." In that encounter, we learn our identity as a pilgrim people, always on a journey of faith with a vocation that we must fulfill in our day, in our time, in our society. That vocation is to be ambassadors of a God who, beyond all human comprehension and in the very worst of circumstances, and to the most unlikely people, even ours and God's own worst enemies, is unfailingly gracious.