

June 2, 2013

1 Kings 18:20-39

Psalm 96

Galatians 1:1-12

LUKE 7:1-10

## ELIJAH: A HERO FOR US

The prophet Elijah is featured in today's Old Testament reading -- and in all five of the Sunday Old Testament readings for the month of June. Elijah was and is, you could say, a big-time member of the "Biblical Hall of Fame." How big? Well, when Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain apart and Jesus was transfigured before them, two great godly heroes appeared next to Jesus: Moses -- and Elijah. That's the list.

Elijah also was one of only two people in the Bible who were taken up into heaven without dying -- and the prophet Malachi (whose book is the last one in the Old Testament) predicted that Elijah would return again to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. This is why Jewish families set an extra place and chair at their tables for the Passover meal: in case Elijah returns and comes to *their* house that very night. We Christians, however, recall that we have been told by Jesus (in Matthew 11:14) that "if you are willing to accept it, John the Baptist is Elijah who is to come."

Elijah is part of the core tradition of Hebrew prophecy which Christians have inherited (and ignore at our peril) of deep commitment to God, of social justice, of a personal relationship with God, and of incredible faith, courage and guts. With Elijah you have both guts and glory -- and a hero who has a lot to teach us for our lives today.

Today's reading concerns one of Elijah's "greatest hits": his so-called "contest" with 450 prophets of the pagan deity Ba-al for the hearts and minds of the people of Israel, a contest which (in the short term) turned out not to be much of a contest at all. Ba-al was one of a number of pagan deities the Israelites were being tempted -- or commanded -- to worship instead of the one true God by none other than the King of Israel himself (Ahab) especially his wife, a pagan foreigner, *Jezebel*.

Folks, if you have ever heard any woman called a "Jezebel", that is so not a compliment. All Jezebel needed was a broom, know what I mean? She was for all practical purposes a witch, and definitely not the Hermione Granger type of witch, but more like the White Witch of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Jezebel was pulling nearly the whole nation of Israel, not just her husband, away from God, hastened by the fact that, well, things *happened* to people who got in Jezebel's way. Contrary to Israel's tradition since King David that kings and queens were *not* absolute monarchs but had to obey the 10 Commandments or else the same as anyone else, Jezebel wanted an absolute dictatorship like the other ancient Middle eastern monarchies.

The Bible's tradition of *checks and balances on power* -- the King was only one of three power centers, along with the priests and the prophets -- is reflected in our American Constitution, so these ancient stories of Elijah are very contemporary in certain ways. The Israelite kings could sometimes enhance their power by buying off the priests, but never the real prophets, the ones whose names are in the Bible. The independence of the real prophets annoyed some of the kings -- and queens -- but the prophets' brutal honesty and courage laid the foundation for our freedom.

Elijah realized that Israel had reached a crossroads just as America would in the 1850's, needing to choose whether to be free or a country of slaves. "Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide" was a hymn popular in anti-slavery circles in the years before the Civil War. That was Elijah's message too. As he says in today's reading to the crowd assembled by his enemy, King Ahab, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Ba-al, follow him."

Elijah set up a contest with the 450 prophets of Ba-al in terms the people of his time could understand. Each side would prepare a sacrifice (killing and cutting up a bull and laying the pieces of a pile of wood), and the god who answered the prayers of his worshipers by sending lightning out of a clear blue sky to burn up the sacrifice should be acclaimed as God. The 450 prophets of Ba-al go first, all morning long, and nothing happens. At noon, Elijah mocks Ba-al's failure to respond, attributing it to his being "asleep" or maybe "on a journey", a genteel translation of "maybe Ba-al has gone to the bathroom and can't be reached." Of course, Ba-al in fact does not exist. He is a snare and a delusion. A lot of bull indeed.

Elijah prepares his sacrifice, heavy with symbolic meaning: he surrounds it with twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Even though the people of Israel in his time are divided into two independent countries, Israel and Judah, he emphasizes the spiritual unity of all of God's people. Elijah orders that the offering be saturated with water so that what happens next would be more dramatic, and then he calls upon "the

LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” -- reminding the people not only who God is but who *they* are: the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

What happened next could be described, actually, by John Sheridan, who was practicing the organ just before a Wednesday service a couple of weeks ago when a powerful lightning bolt hit -- thankfully -- the grounded lightning rod in our tower right over John’s head, with a thunderclap to match. BOOM!

Elijah, on the other hand, had deliberately *not* installed a grounded lightning rod on the place of worship he had built so that “the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench.” The people of Israel, not wanting to be God’s next target, “fell on their faces and said, ‘The LORD indeed is God.’”

Game and set to Elijah. But not match, not yet. He was, after all, still dealing with Jezebel, who sent him a message which said something like [with mafioso-type accent], “I got a real soft spot for you. My boys are out diggin’ it now.” Actually, her note said that if Elijah was not out of the country in 24 hours, he would be “pushing up daisies”. Elijah, being an intelligent fellow and well aware of Jezebel’s excellent track record of following through effectively on such threats, decided this was the time to use his Continuing Education budget and go on retreat as far away from Jezebel as possible.

Like two countries away, to Mt. Sinai, where Elijah throws himself a really nifty “pity party”, having gone from a manic “high” on Mt. Carmel to a depressive “low” on Mt. Sinai.

So what have we learned from Elijah?

Lesson #1: **one person can make a difference.** Elijah did. Israel did remain faithful to God, or at least enough of the Israelite people did: God saved a remnant of the people. Jezebel is long gone. Elijah and those who revere him are very much around. Each one of **us** can also make a difference, especially if we have the same coach as Elijah: Almighty God.

Lesson #2: **it takes guts to take on a powerful person.** Many if not most great moral stands in societies have taken and continue to take courage. There will be plenty more opportunities to stand up for the right in the lifetimes of those here today. We should each stand for something or sit down. It is easier to “go with the flow”, but not always right. If you need courage, don’t ask the cowardly lion, ask God.

Lesson #3: **“Whistle-blowers” don’t always get parades and testimonial dinners.** Sometimes they get persecuted, or worse. If you decide you want to make a difference and make a courageous moral stand, recognize in advance that appreciation is not always part of the package. But *God* appreciates and can strengthen people who stand up for the right, and will stick with you also, even if you come to feel as isolated and depressed as Elijah at one point did (see the June 23 reading).

Lesson #4: **You may find faith -- and allies -- in unexpected places.** Jesus in today’s Gospel reading found it in a Roman Centurion -- and officer in the army which had conquered and was occupying his country! Elijah found it -- stay tuned next week for the exciting sequel -- in a widow in Zarephath, to whom he made a *promise* about *food*, a promise which continues to be kept today by the staff and volunteers of our Food Pantry and of *Elijah’s Promise Soup Kitchen*. All of us can help to keep the promise.

Lesson #5: **keep on keeping on.** June 16th’s Old Testament reading about Elijah vs. Ahab and Jezebel over Naboth’s vineyard is a classic biblical story about social justice. We too can stand up for social justice as heirs of Elijah.

And Lesson #6: **if you are working with God, you are never alone.** Not only is God with you, but God is like a really good sports “general manager” and will find teammates for you -- maybe even a future “Hall of Famer” to work with you and succeed you, as Elisha does Elijah in our June 30th reading. For us, *the good that we do will not die with us*. God will take care of that.

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