

Date: March 5, 2006

SUNDAY: Lent 1

SERMON: By Whose Word?

Text(s): 1 Kings 17:1-16; Mark 1:9-13

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When Ray first asked me about the possibility of focusing on the stories about Elijah the prophet in our worship in these weeks leading up to the choir's spring concert where they'll be singing Mendelssohn's oratorio *Elijah*, I thought it was a great idea. The stories of Elijah are really interesting stories, and probably not so well-known as some others in the Bible, so I said, sure Ray, that'll be great.

Well, that was my first mistake. The second was to go back and actually re-read those stories. That's when I discovered that either those stories had changed since the last time I read them, or I had changed, or the world had changed, or something, but whatever happened, those are not the same stories I remember. What a pain! Oh, not because I'd have to work harder on preaching those stories, but because I've had to think a lot harder about what's in those stories than I thought I would have to. It's having to change my thinking and come to terms with those changes that is the real pain. That's always the danger in reading the Bible, of course. You always run the risk that something new is going to jump out of the text and bite you on the bottom. It's a good argument for not reading our Bibles. We often get more than we bargained for. You just never know what to expect.

Elijah has always been one of my favorite Biblical characters—heroic in his courageous confrontation with the weak and henpecked King Ahab and his wicked queen Jezebel. At least that's the way they were always pictured in my childhood Sunday School lessons. Ahab had married this Phoenician woman, who was a worshiper of the Mesopotamian nature god Baal, who, along with his female consort Astarte or Ashtoroth, guaranteed the fertility of the earth and animals and humans. Jezebel proved to be the stronger willed of the two, and she pretty

much ran Ahab as well as his kingdom. At her insistence, he allowed altars to Baal and Ashtoroth to be set up all over the land, and tolerated, if not actually encouraged his subjects to be inclusive in their religious loyalties and practices. Yes, of course, continue to worship the God of Israel, but it doesn't hurt to give a nod to Baal also.

Now to moderns like us for whom inclusivity and religious pluralism has itself become a religion, this doesn't sound so bad. After all, we are into finding our own individual spiritual path, and a little bit of Christianity and a little bit of Buddhism and a little bit of Islamic Sufi wisdom and a little bit of Druid tree hugging makes for a nice, interesting little brew that keeps us warm on cold nights of the soul.

But to some people, Israel's reception of the Law of Moses given in the cloud and glory and terror of Mt. Sinai was still a vivid experience in their collective memory. That thundering first commandment "I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me," made Ahab's weak-willed acquiescence to Jezebel's polytheistic program (or liberal program of religious pluralism to put it in more familiar modern lingo), appear nothing less than the rankest apostasy. It was anathema to the true worshipers of Israel's God. Better to starve than to go after gods that are nothing more than personifications of the forces of nature.

Worshiping the God who was revealed to Israel on Mt. Sinai was risky business, because this God demanded absolute loyalty and fidelity. This was not because of any divine insecurity on God's part, but because there were no other gods who existed outside of projections of the human mind, of the collective psyche, if you will. Only the God of Israel, whose revealed name was simply "I AM" had real existence distinct from the created world. God was so far above human knowledge or understanding that nothing at all could be said about God that did not run the risk of becoming an idol. Which is why John Calvin said that the human imagination is an inexhaustible font of idol-making.

So, if we're going to understand anything in these Elijah stories, we have to begin by understanding the utter seriousness of the context in which they take place. For Elijah and others within Israel, the struggle between those who insisted on the worship of Israel's God alone and those who wanted to be more open and inclusive to the worship of other gods as well, was a life or death matter. Either God was God alone or not, and the nation had to choose which of those two alternatives it was going to live by.

If you think this question has gone away, you haven't been paying attention to the news recently. The furor in the Muslim world over the cartoons depicting Muhammad as a terrorist, is the most recent case in point. In the civilizations of the West, where religion has been relegated to the sphere of private, individual choice, we just don't get why the Muslims are so outraged. For us, it's a simple matter of freedom of speech in a democratic, secular society. We fail to see that in relegating religion to sphere of subjective, individual, we have also simply assumed that no religion can legitimately make any objective or universal truth claims. Whatever truth there is, it is only a truth for me. So, to the West, all the fuss the Muslims are making over the cartoons looks like primitive fanaticism or fanatical primitivism.

But, having lived in Malaysia, a Muslim country, I can tell you that for many faithful Muslims, it is a life-and-death matter of the truth. Either there is one God or there is not. Either God has spoken definitively through his prophet Muhammad or not. An insult to Muhammad is an insult to the God who is One and who alone grounds all other living beings in their existence. For us to claim that this is simply an issue of democratic freedom of speech is to miss the point entirely.

And that brings us to today's texts. Two new things caught my attention that I had never noticed before in these stories, and I'm still trying to work them out. One is the fact that in virtually

all the other prophetic writings in the Bible—Jeremiah, Amos, and all the rest—the prophet always establishes his credentials with the formula, “The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah (or whoever.)” So that what follows is clearly designated as the Divine Word which the prophet has heard, and his hearing of that word is what constitutes his vocation as God's spokesman to the nation. The true prophet never speaks on his own authority. He has been spoken to, and he simply passes on what he has been given. But here, there is no such validation of Elijah's role as a prophet at the beginning of the story. In fact, he appears as though out of nowhere. *Now Elijah the Tishbite 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.”* Did you get that— by *my* word, i.e., Elijah's word. The curse he pronounces on Ahab and the nation is Elijah's word, not God's.

Now, however, God's word enters the picture— after Elijah has spoken his own word. The very next sentence is *The word of the Lord came to him saying, “Go hide yourself by the wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you.”*

And this brings me to the second new thing that struck me in this text: God's word not only comes after Elijah's word, but it does not reverse Elijah's word or undo it. Rather, it takes its departure from it. In other words, God's own word binds God's action to Elijah's— as we'll see, Elijah's curse works. No rain will fall for three years, though it is not God who told Elijah to deliver that curse.

This is actually a rather startling insight, to me at least. I'm still not sure I know where it's leading me, but I wonder if this says something that may help us understand the relationship between God's sovereignty and omnipotence, on the one hand, and our freedom on the other. To what extent is God bound by our actions? To what extent do our words move and shape

events? To what extent does God's freedom intersect with ours? These and more are questions that I bring away from this story of Elijah. I have far more questions than answers at this point.

But it does strike me as significant that God doesn't intervene to stop Elijah from delivering this curse. Rather God sets about rescuing his overly-bold prophet from his own predicament. Elijah speaks the curse; when God speaks, it is to send Elijah into the desert, where he is miraculously sustained by wild animals, rather than by his own ability to sustain himself. I suspect that St. Mark had this story in his mind when he wrote that intriguing sentence in our Gospel lesson today, where he says that following Jesus' baptism, *"immediately, the Spirit drove him into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts and angels ministered to him."*

For Elijah, and for Jesus, it seems that the wilderness or the desert became a place of both personal and vocational testing and self-discovery. There both of them confront some really hard questions about whose word it is that they are really called to speak—their own word, or God's word. By whose word, whose authority are both Elijah and Jesus speaking and acting?

Elijah himself experienced the curse he put on the nation. When the drought got bad enough, even the stream in the wadi Cherith where he had found sustenance dried up, and then God's word enters the picture again. *"Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'Go now to Zarephath, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.'"*

Again, I found myself surprised by this text. I had never noticed before that God tells Elijah that he has already commanded a widow, a pagan Gentile, no less, to feed Elijah. From the story that immediately follows, there's certainly no evidence that the widow knew this. It

explains why Elijah is so insistent that she make him a round of pita bread with her last little bit of flour and oil. But it doesn't explain her surprise, her reluctance, her very understandable fear of giving her last morsel to a total stranger on the basis of some wild promise he makes her about an unending supply of oil and flour.

Suddenly we're confronted by this God's will/human freedom question again, and the question of the relationship between our words and God's word. If it is God who has commanded the widow to feed Elijah, how did that command come, and why does she appear to be unaware of it. Well, it appears that God's command doesn't come except through Elijah's command. When confronted with this stranger who issues this strange command to her, she has no idea that it's really God whose command she is hearing. Her struggle is, on the surface at least, a struggle with Elijah's word. We, the readers, are aware that in her struggle with Elijah's word, she is really, at a much more profound level, encountering the word of God, but she's not aware of that.

And I suspect that's the way it really is for all of us all the time. Among all the words that come to us, all the things that command our attention, our priority, our loyalty, our obedience, which are merely human words, and which are truly God's word? Can we ever really know in the moment of decision which is which, or do we only, if ever, become aware of that in hindsight? Which is what it means, I suppose, to live by faith—that we never know for certain, in the moment, that our decision is the right one, our word the true word, our vision the most clear-sighted. But we make the decision and trust God to work with us.

As we look back over our own lives, isn't this the way it has really worked for us? At the time, we make our decision based on the best knowledge, the best information (or lack of it) that we have, trying to balance our own needs and desires with those of family and opportunity

and the needs of others. Sure we pray for guidance, but the guidance is hardly ever apparent at the time, in the moment of decision. And some of the time, I'd guess, that we've all discovered, like Elijah, that perhaps our word was not really God's word at all, though God always allows us the freedom of our decisions, even when they've turned out to be the wrong ones. We really are the principal actors in the human drama. Our words and our decisions really do create human history. You see, I don't think God ever wanted Elijah to curse Israel with a three-year drought. I think Elijah cared more for God's honor than God did. But God went along. God's actions were bound to Elijah's, though not ultimately limited by them. There's an old Jewish saying that no matter how dark we weave the tapestry of our lives, God always manages to weave in a bright thread of grace. And I think that may be the real point of all these Elijah stories, as we'll see in the coming weeks as well.

Elijah got his drought. He meant well; he wanted to wake up the nation. But it really turned out to be a curse. A lot of people suffered as a result, and not nearly all of them deserved it. And he himself only got by with the help of a few wild ravens and a poverty-stricken Gentile widow who also heard the word of God, as it turned out, in hindsight. *"The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that God spoke by Elijah."* Elijah's word, spoken on his own authority, resulted in a curse on the land and real hardship. God's word resulted in both Elijah's and a poor widow's survival, and some real learning for both of them.

So we're left with the mystery of God's freedom and our freedom and how the two intersect. I'm not sure we'll ever get it sorted out this side of heaven, but at least Elijah's stories can give us some help along the way. And from them, we may learn something about what it really means to be a human being living by faith

in a God who loves us to the point where God will allow us to speak our own word in freedom for good or ill, but who will always manage to insert a bright thread of grace into the weave to bring about ours and the world's ultimate good.