

"Ahab and Elijah"

1 Kings 16:29-34

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In the Bible, only two persons were ever mentioned as escaping death- Enoch and Elijah; only two persons were privileged to appear with Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration- Moses and Elijah; and another prophet, Malachi, predicted that Elijah would return before "the great and terrible day of the Jehovah" (Mal. 4:5), with the result that many in Jesus's day never stopped looking for him- even thinking that JESUS was that man. Yet, NOBODY could have been MORE DIFFERENT from him than ELIJAH- the GREATEST of all Israel's prophets. Biographical details about him remain quite murky: His father and mother are nowhere mentioned and he has no wife and family to speak of. We have no record of his early years, none whatsoever of his education or training. He is called "Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead" and yet to this day, nobody even knows where Tishbe was located. Clad in a simple hair shirt and a leather girdle, he mysteriously emerges from nowhere, and then, once his mission is completed, he just AS mysteriously disappears.

Though we know so little regarding the details of this extraordinary man, we DO know much more about the conditions in Israel which GAVE RISE to him and his stirring ministry. They begin with the emergence of one of the most controversial monarchs Israel ever had- King Ahab. Now by most measures, Ahab could be considered a great monarch. He carried on many of the same policies begun by King Solomon some fifty years previously, thereby helping to transform Northern Israel from a poor, backwards, agricultural country with an economy dependent upon cattle and crops, into one that was more modern and more diverse. As Solomon had formed a commercial treaty with Egypt after shrewdly marrying the daughter of Pharaoh, so AHAB created a powerful political and economic alliance with ETHBAAL, the king of Phoenicia and high priest of Ashteroth, by marrying his daughter JEZEBEL. He opened trade with many of the great commercial centers of the ancient world such as Damascus in Syria and encouraged the arts. He proved victorious in war and even recovered the cities which had been lost by one of his predecessors. Northern Israel enjoyed great prosperity under him.

But the Old Testament really doesn't tell us anything of his great successes and military conquests. Instead, it places THIS most dreadful epitaph upon his reign: "But Ahab, the Son of Omri, did more evil in the sight of the Lord than ALL that were before him." It was the prophet Micah who had reminded Israel what her TRUE covenant obligations to God were: "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" but such qualities as love, kindness, justice, humility, and righteousness were absent from Ahab's reign. Despite all of the wealth and strength she had accrued, Israel was progressively disintegrating from within. The rich continued to grow richer at the expense of the poor and middle class while the poor were forced to borrow money at incredibly high rates of interest that could rarely be repaid. As a result, they were forced to lose their land or even sell themselves or their children into slavery to meet their debt.

But far MORE serious was Ahab's blatant rejection of Jehovah. By marrying Jezebel--

often called "the wickedest woman in the Bible"--she was allowed to import her pagan worship of Baal and Ashteroth into the land in an attempt to rid Israel of Yahweh worship and make the cult of Ba'al the official religion of the land. Temples for the purpose of the worship of golden calves were set up in Bethel and Dan along with new rituals and a whole new priesthood. This represented MORE than a rejection of the Temple and priesthood that had been established in Jerusalem in the southern kingdom- it was an explicit rejection of JEHOVAH HIMSELF in favor of another. Baal was the god of natural power, the god of light, the god of increase while Ashtoreth was its female counterpart. Their worship involved all sorts of perversion, violence, and unbridled greed- everything that could pollute and degrade humanity was practiced in honor of these self-made gods. Thus, the alliance between Ahab and Jezebel threatened to destroy Northern Israel as both a nation and as the people of God.

So it was only a matter of time before conflict developed between God's spokespersons and King Ahab of the house of Omri. God's prophets, whom Jehovah had raised up to proclaim his word of judgment, were soon subjected to intense persecution. Some, out of fear for their lives, made COMPROMISES with Ahab while others REMAINED TRUE, believing that Ahab and the rest of his house were ALREADY condemned. Many of the faithful were thus alienated, not just from their own nation but from many of their fellow prophets as well. It was a desperate and lonely period in the history of Israel. Yet, IN SPITE of Israel's faithlessness, God remained loyal to them and to the covenant he had established with them and he did so by raising up one who would fearlessly speak his word to both the king and his people- THE PROPHET ELIJAH.

What had to be ESPECIALLY dismaying to Elijah was that the conflict he was about to enter seemed so unfair, so one-sided. On the one hand, you have a king, from the mighty house of Omri; on the other, you have an obscure little prophet with no home that we know of. On the one side is the religious establishment- the temples, its rites, and its priesthood while on the other, there is Elijah armed with little more than the Word of God. Ahab commands the support of the rich and powerful in his country; he has allies with many of the nations of the ancient world. Elijah is but one man with a deep passion for JUSTICE for his people and RIGHTEOUSNESS for his God. Yet, as we shall see in the weeks ahead, with God on one's side, this unknown, unannounced, seemingly uneducated, solitary figure armed with little else than the Word of God becomes the one man God will use to end the reign of Ahab and his wicked court, and to cast down the gods of Baal and Ashteroth with their temples and rites and priesthood.

As we delve deeper into this story, we will see how throughout history, the root problem has always remained the same- IDOLATRY. The worship of idols is one of the most consistent themes throughout the scriptures. While we think of idolatry in terms of ancient pagan rituals and cults, the Bible sees idolatry as present and pervasive in every culture and period of history. The problem is that it robs God of his glory; it deprives him of the honor which he alone deserves so that we might glorify OURSELVES, INSTEAD- we who are part of God's created order. This worship takes many forms and it manifests itself in our lives, our relationships, our institutions, our ideologies, our movements, and our nations. Some of our modern-day idols take the form of money, possessions, power, race, class, sex, nation, status, success, work, violence, religion, ideology, causes, and so on. Caught in the grip of idol worship are our corporations and institutions of commerce, the state and the branches of government, the private and public bureaucracies, the various professions, the schools and universities, media and entertainment, and EVEN THE CHURCHES.

Simply put, idolatry originates in the human decision to seek life and salvation apart from the source of life in God. Idols are "imposters of God" as one theologian has put it. They may be things, ideas, persons, or institutions- anything we place ULTIMATE TRUST in whether it be our jobs, our bank accounts, our government, our pleasures; anything we allow ourselves to become slaves to- that in fact becomes our IDOL and we become no better than Ahab and the Israelites. The gods may be different but the worship, the power we give to these things over our lives, remains the same.

God's prophets are among the LONELIEST people in the Bible- running against the tide all by themselves, never receiving honor even in their own hometowns, often alienated from their own families. Hebrews, chapter 11, where a number of the great heroes of the Hebrew faith are listed, tell us that many of God's prophets "suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated- of whom the world was not worthy- wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." Elijah was forced to hide in a cave from the wrath of Jezebel; John the Baptist was beheaded; Jesus was crucified; the disciples and many members of the early Church became martyrs for their faith.

And yet, the biblical record is quite clear that if one is willing to serve as an agent of God's righteousness and justice and speak truth to power, then the one at a serious disadvantage is NEVER the lonely prophet or prophetess but rather the one whom he or she CONTENTS AGAINST. God only needs one loyal, faith-filled individual and WITH that person, God can bring the powers of this world to its knees. Thousands of years ago, God raised up his servant Moses--the Great Deliverer--who confronted Pharaoh and demanded "Let my people go." When Pharaoh REFUSED, he personally led them across the Sea of Reeds where Pharaoh's army was destroyed, and THEN through the barren wilderness until they eventually entered the Land of Promise. God demonstrated that same power of a lone individual a century ago, when he chose a small, devout Indian lawyer named Gandhi who turned a sit-down strike into a non-violent revolution that brought independence to India. He confirmed that sixty-five years ago when he called forth a young Baptist minister named King who turned a local bus boycott into a national civil rights movement. God again showed that in the late 1970's when he raised up an unknown Polish electrician named Lech Walensa in a Gdansk shipyard to lead a small union named Solidarity which, more than any other factor, helped usher in the great tide of democracy that eventually swept through eastern Europe.

This past week, the body of John Lewis--the son of a poor sharecropper who would later go on to serve as a congressman from Georgia for over 33 years--was laid to rest. He thus became the first black lawmaker to lie in state in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol and upon the same funeral bier Lincoln's OWN body had once lain. Fifty-seven years ago--at twenty-three years of age--he was the youngest speaker at the now infamous "March on Washington" when on that hot August afternoon, in front of the Lincoln Memorial, Martin Luther King relayed a dream God had given him to share with the REST of America. Often called "the conscience of the Congress," John Lewis was just one in a mighty vanguard raised up by God to challenge the wicked system of segregation--America's OWN Apartheid system--that had operated throughout the Deep South since the days of Reconstruction. With a steadfast commitment to non-violence, they were armed with little more than a vision that one day and with God's help, JUSTICE might "roll down like a river" and RIGHTEOUSNESS "like a never-ending stream" as the prophet Amos had foretold.

Together, they organized voter registrations, led sit-ins at lunch counters, started boycotts of businesses, and conducted marches that continued for months on end. They were met at every turn by mobs of Jim Crow segregationists who were determined to keep America white AT ALL COSTS; persons willing to go to ANY EXTREME in order to preserve their precious white privilege. Night after night, scenes of those marchers attacked by police officers and firefighters with cattle prods, snarling dogs, fire hoses and nightsticks appeared on television screens for ALL OF AMERICA to witness.

Lewis, himself, was one of the original thirteen Freedom Riders- an integrated group of both women and men who rode buses into the Deep South to challenge the nation's segregation laws. He told how even before the bus left the station, each rider was asked to compose their own "last will and testament" in the event they were killed by those waiting to attack them once they had arrived. Entering Montgomery, Alabama, they were struck with baseball bats, iron pipes, and bicycle chains and he was left unconscious in a pool of his own blood outside the bus terminal. He even spent a month in Mississippi's notorious Parchman Penitentiary. Eventually the national conscience was SO shocked that Congress would eventually pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act one year later. In his memoir, John Lewis wrote that the essence of the nonviolent life is the capacity to forgive "even as a person is cursing you to your face, even as he is spitting on you, or pushing a lit cigarette into your neck" and to understand that your attacker is as much a victim as you are. At bottom, this philosophy rested upon the belief that people of good will—"the Beloved Community" as Lewis called them—would rouse THEMSELVES to combat evil and injustice.

The Pulitzer Prize winning historian Taylor Branch described a 1961 debate within the civil rights movement about whether to keep up demonstrations in Nashville in the face of escalating white violence. He wrote, "Whenever someone asked a question, Lewis ignored the fine points of whatever theory was being put forward and said simply, 'We're gonna march tonight,'" A prominent white clergyman named Will D. Campbell lost his temper and accused Lewis of the sin of pride. "Lewis smiled warmly at Campbell, as though taking pity on him." "'OK, I'm a sinner,' he replied softly. 'We're gonna march.'" His persistence won, the march went on and he was arrested for the fourth of at least 45 times. Lewis had seen the worst of it and STILL had faith. In an essay which John Lewis wrote for *The New York Times* that was published on the day of his funeral, he said, "Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call GOOD trouble, NECESSARY trouble."

I want to close my sermon by referencing one LAST figure- a man who by general consensus could truly be called ANOTHER "latter-day Elijah." In 1994, the new President of South Africa was a man who the YEAR BEFORE had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. His name was Nelson Mandela and prior to his election, he had just been released from prison where he had spent twenty-seven years at hard labor for trying to bring to an end his nation's brutal Apartheid policies. When he was born, he was given the name Rolihlahla Mandela, a name which meant "troublemaker," but his teacher in school called him "Nelson" instead, in the hope he wouldn't live up to his name. Little did she know that in a few years, he would use "GOOD" trouble to become one of the GREATEST troublemakers IN HISTORY, a man who in time would become not just the MOST FAMOUS MAN in the world for his unyielding courage, but its GREATEST MORAL SPOKESPERSON as well. He has said, "I was not a messiah, but an ordinary man who had become a leader because of extraordinary circumstances." He said he had

no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth, but rather what he called “a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand indignities and a thousand unremembered moments produced in me an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people. There was no particular day on which I said, ‘Henceforth I will devote myself to the liberation of my people’; instead, I simply found myself doing so, and could not do otherwise.” He knew--just as John Lewis knew when he had persisted in saying before the threat of white violence, “We’re gonna march,”--that there comes a moment when the TIME FOR TALKING is over and THE TIME FOR ACTING must BEGIN.

Mandela said that in the face of such systemic ills and institutional injustices as poverty and discrimination and persecution, it falls on a generation to be great and that WE can be that generation, that WE can be those men and women who will rise to the occasion and say NO! to such conditions and abuses. In response to them, he challenged persons to let their "greatness blossom." Well THAT, my friends, becomes the CHURCH'S big challenge- to let OUR "greatness blossom"- a challenge that must be met by ANY person who would call him or herself a child of God, a brother or sister of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul tells us that God chooses the weak, the despised, and the powerless to accomplish his purpose so that no person may boast before him. If that IS the case, then God is able to use such common instruments as YOU and ME to accomplish his ends. If God can employ persons as ORDINARY as Elijah or Moses; as a John Lewis or Nelson Mandela to help change the world and make it a more just and humane place, then as members of God's family, WE must then be willing to take that SAME difficult stand when the opportunity presents itself to US. We must be willing to raise our collective voices whether it be against such sins as racism and homophobia, or the growing anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment in our country; whether it concerns the increasing divide between the haves and have-nots that's forcing more and more people to sleep in their cars or a public park than in a nice warm bed, persons often with limited recourse to a hot meal or quality healthcare. WE must be willing to stand up to ANY injustice that degrades or dehumanizes another human being REGARDLESS of the risks such a stand may incur. And yet as Jesus promised in his Beatitudes, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. REJOICE and BE GLAD, for your reward is GREAT in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

There's an old Hassidic tale told in which Rabbi Zusya says just before his death, "In the world to come, I shall not be asked, 'Why were you not Abraham? Why were you not Moses?' Rather, I shall be asked, 'Why were you not Zusya?'" Likewise, you or I won't be asked, "Why were you not Peter or why were you not Paul? Why were you not Gandhi or King or Lewis or Mandela? No, we shall each be asked, "Why were you not YOU? Why were you not David or Joe or Jim, or Sally or Sue? Why were you not who I specially made you to be and in the garden in which I planted you? Why did you not appreciate the love and care I've never stopped extending your way? Why did you not feel compassion in your heart for those with greater needs and cares around you? Why did you turn away when there was someone before you with an outstretched hand or a situation or condition to be changed?" We have seen how God needs only one loyal, one faith-filled individual and he can bring the powers of this world to its knees. By the end of our study, may each of US have the courage and the faith to say, "Lord, please let ME be that person." Amen and amen.