



"Listening for God"

1 Kings 19:1-15a

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Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

King Ahab lived up to his reputation. He was a bad man and a corrupt and evil leader. He followed a long line of bad rulers but, as 1 Kings puts it, he was by far the worst of the lot.

Among Ahab's many bad decisions was the choice of one his wives – Jezebel. Jezebel was a Phoenician princess whom Ahab married to create a political alliance with her father, the King of Phoenicia.

Jezebel was a devotee of a local, popular god, Baal, and Baal's consort, the goddess Asherah. Baal and Asherah were gods of love and war – interesting combination, don't you think?

As god and goddess of love, Baal and Asherah controlled the clouds, the rain, and the weather. They were fertility gods who brought rain and fertility to the land, the animals, and the people. Their counterpart was a god, Mot, the god of aridity and infertility. Droughts were blamed on Mot, fertility credited to Baal. Baal and Mot battled constantly over the land.

Baal worship featured Temples devoted to sex and fertility. Temple prostitutes of both sexes worked in the Temples, and men and women engaged in sexual acts with the prostitutes for the purpose of encouraging fertility. Enough sex in the Temple manipulated the gods toward rain and fertility.

As you might imagine, Baal worship was quite popular! The people of Israel forsook God for the worship of Baal and Asherah. Unregulated copulation seemed much more attractive than the morally demanding and highly ethical God of Israel. Who cared that God's demands were intended to create an ordered community of shalom – peace and prosperity for all – without exploitation of any?

And as you might imagine, God and the prophets of God were not happy with the morally degrading worship of Baal. To the horror of the prophets, Jezebel installed a Baal Temple in the great Temple of God in Jerusalem. The well-ordered community of the people of God was rapidly becoming immoral and increasingly violent. And the Baal cult, under the direction of Ahab and Jezebel, was slaughtering the prophets of the Most High God.

The rapidly diminishing number of prophets of God thundered denunciation on Baalism and on the people for their descent into pagan idolatry. Nothing up to now had triggered such strong prophetic reaction. Only the century-later practice of child sacrifice provoked such prophetic ire.

One of the surviving prophets was the great Hebrew prophet, Elijah. Elijah burst onto the scene shortly after Ahab married Jezebel. She brought Baal and Asherah prophets with her and they began to subvert the moral order.

Suddenly, Elijah appears, shakes his prophetic finger in Ahab's face, and declares, "As the Lord lives, it shall not rain again until God decides to send rain." That was, of course, a direct challenge to Baal and, at the same time, a challenge to Ahab's rule. At stake was Baal's claim to control the weather and Ahab's indulgence of Baal worship.

Sure enough the rain stopped. And, sure enough, Elijah rose to the top of Ahab and Jezebel's "enemies list." Elijah realized that being a public enemy of the royal house guaranteed a short life. He fled the country.

In the third year of the drought, the word of the Lord came to Elijah. God was going to send rain. The point had been made and reinforced. God is the Lord – not Baal.

Elijah headed for home. He arranged a meeting with Ahab out in the countryside. Ahab showed up in full fury. "You troubler of Israel," he shouted.

"No, you are the troubler of Israel," Elijah shouted back. Then Elijah told the king that rain was coming. "But," Elijah added, "the rain will come only after a showdown."

Elijah proposed a great God vs. the gods showdown on Mt. Carmel. He told Ahab to bring 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah to the mountain. He alone would represent God. Whichever side could call down fire from heaven would be the winner – or their God would be the winner. All Israel was invited to come and watch.

The day of the showdown arrived. The prophets of Baal and Asherah went first. They began to pray to Baal to bring down fire. Nothing. They prayed harder. Nothing. For hours they prayed with increasing vigor. Nothing. By afternoon they began to whip themselves into a frenzy, cutting themselves, dancing, begging. Nothing. Or, as the story puts it, "No voice. No answer. No response."

Now Elijah was not aware of political correctness or the kindness of religious dialogue. He went right after the pagan prophets. "Hey what's wrong?" he cried. "Is your god in bed – with Asherah – too busy to pay attention? Maybe Baal is out of town on a trip? Is Asherah meditating?"

When it was late afternoon, it was Elijah's turn. He built an altar of 12 stones, one each of the tribes of Israel. He piled wood on the altar and placed a sacrificial animal on the wood. Then he drenched the entire area with water.

He prayed a simple prayer. "God of heaven and earth, God of Israel, prove yourself to these your wayward people. Send down fire." And sure enough, fire came down and consumed Elijah's offering.

Elijah, overcome by the power of the moment, ordered the prophets of Baal and Asherah to be put to death. It was not a pretty scene.

When it was over, Elijah told Ahab to get home. The rain was coming, and his chariot might get stuck in the mud. Ahab gladly retreated home to his palace and Jezebel. He barely beat the storm.

As soon as he arrived back at the palace, Ahab told Jezebel how Elijah had killed her prophets. She flew into a fury. "May the gods do to me and more if Elijah is not dead by this time tomorrow."

Elijah was already on the run. He was frightened for his life. Somehow the showdown did not turn out quite like he expected. All the special effects he ordered from God

made no difference. Ahab was still king. Baal was still worshipped by too many people. The people did not rise up in revolt against Ahab and the priests of Baal. There was no spiritual renewal in Israel. In fact, Elijah sped away from Israel muttering that all Israel still worshipped Baal.

The prophet was disappointed in God and disappointed in himself. The special effects apparently needed some follow-up. Success wasn't all it was cracked up to be. There's more to a national revival than meets the eye. All that work on the mountain and nothing to show for it.

That's not an uncommon human reaction to great success. Deep valleys often follow mountaintop experiences. Great achievement can seem empty. "Now what?" we wonder.

Elijah's disappointment in God is common, too. There is so much evil, so much suffering, so much struggle, and God seems silent. "Where is God when it hurts?" is one of life's most enduring questions.

Elijah was so depressed that when he stopped running for the night, he told God to just go ahead and kill him. He was no better than any of the prophets before him. He had not been able to make the difference he thought he'd make. All that work and nothing to show for it.

You might have noticed the prophet was confused. He's on the run fearing for his life, and he's calling out to God to kill him. Does he want to live or does he want to die? He apparently can't make up his mind.

Finally, Elijah got where he was going – the holy mountain of God, Mt. Sinai, where God speaks. Elijah wanted a word from the Lord. He wanted to know what God thought about things.

Like all the stories of the Bible, this story is really about God and about how God responds to humans and human crises. And like all humans in a crisis, Elijah wanted a word from God. What does God say in the face of monstrous evil? Does evil finally triumph over good? And for Elijah, where were the special effects now?

He crawled into a cave on the mountain of God to wait for God. He sat there in the dark and in his despair waiting for a word.

We join him there. We've all been in caves of discouragement or despair – in the darkness waiting for a word from God, demanding a word from God. I've been there. So have you. In fact, some of you might have brought your caves with you today. Does God have a word?

When the voice came it asked an ominous question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" The prophet repeated his complaint. Israel was panting in lust after Baal. The prophets of God were being killed. He alone was left, and Jezebel was trying to kill him."

God told Elijah to go back in the cave and listen for an answer. He obeyed. After a while a fierce, rock-splitting wind came. But there was no word from God in the wind. Then an earthquake rocked the earth. Elijah listened carefully, but there was no word in the quake. Then fire roared from heaven. Now fire! Fire often comes with God's voice. But not this time. No voice in the fire.

Then came a gentle whisper. It was the word from God. "What are you doing here?" the voice said. "Go home. Your place is back where you came from."

What do you suppose that means for us sitting here waiting for a word? I asked Rabbi Serge Lippe this week what the "official" Jewish interpretation of the story might be. He

quickly responded, "God is not into special effects." I think he's right. In fact, as Rabbi Lippe went on to suggest, this story might even be a rebuke to Elijah and the people of God, including us, for wanting special effects.

It should be clear from life and from Scripture, there are no easy answers or quick solutions to the very complicated character of life in general and our lives in particular. The word from God is difficult to hear. You have to listen very carefully.

Elijah had to learn that the answer he needed from God was back home in the struggle for God in the face of pagan idolatry. There God would whisper gently. God speaks to us in the hard places in life, not in retreat from them. And when God speaks, it's seldom what we think we'll hear. Every Advent and Christmas, we are reminded that God speaks in the ordinary struggles, in the hard times, and says what is quite unexpected: a peasant couple, labor and delivery, Bethlehem, a barn. And in that struggle, in those mundane lives, God spoke the word that saved the world.

I think there may be one more message in the story. Did you notice that God said to Elijah, "What are you doing *here?*" Not what are you doing there, but *here*. God was in the cave with Elijah. The cave was God's cave. And God would accompany his prophet back to the struggle, be with him in the mundane and ordinary and in it all God would continue to speak in that gentle whisper.

Amen.

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