

October 11, 2020

Altar-ed Living: Elijah

1 Kings 17-19 (selected verses)

Review of Elijah's ministry prior to passage . . .

Chapter 17

- Arrives on the scene; announces drought to Ahab; disappears from the national spotlight.
- The widow of Zarephath; drought has done her in; preparing last meal for her and her son.
 - Elijah says, "Feed me first." God told him to go there, find her and ask this.
 - Miracle of unlimited flour and oil.
 - Later he raises her son from the dead.

Chapter 18

- Back in Ahab's face; calls him on the carpet for his idolatry and poor leadership; tells Ahab to summon the Israelites and the prophets of Baal and Asherah to Mount Carmel for a "Battle Royale" with the intention of calling the Israelites to full devotion to Yahweh.

As I read this morning's passage, remember that we are talking about being "Altered at the Altar" – those places where we find and encounter God; or – better put – where God finds us.

READ 1 KINGS 18:20-40

Where did Elijah come from? How had he been shaped and transformed up to this point?

What had his parents and faith community done to disciple him?

Did he have a rabbi to mentor him; or another prophet?

How had he already learned to listen to and speak for God?

Where did he get the courage to challenge Ahab?

[We don't know, but we can make some guesses: scripture, worship, family/community, prayer]

Approaching any king as a prophet was a bit tricky, even if that king was a "man after God's own heart" like David. But to approach Ahab? Ahab is said to have done "evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him." (1 Kings 16:30) And part of his problem is that, in order to build up Israel's influence and security, he aligns with a foreign king through marriage and joins himself to a woman who worships Baal. He even builds an altar to Baal in downtown Samaria. [Remember: This particular religion, connected to Canaanites and others, includes child sacrifice rituals.] Ahab's wife, Jezebel, makes the focus of her efforts as 'first lady' systematically killing off God's prophets. Elijah, who has been elusive (maybe on the run after being the initial bearer of bad news) comes back to confront Ahab and the prophets of Baal.

In this power-packed event on Mount Carmel, Elijah challenges all 850 prophets of Baal (450) and Asherah (400; Canaanite and ANE goddess of fertility and war) to a contest that will determine whose God/god is real, alive and powerful. Elijah's primary concern is the allegiance of the people of Israel; so he asks them a very pointed question. "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." (1 Kings

18:21) He seems to echo the words of Joshua's "Choose this day." In other words, 'It's time to make up your mind, people. These are not two similar belief systems or deities that compliment each other. You can't serve both with any semblance of integrity.'

Let's put ourselves in the story. How might this prophetic question come to us at this time and in this place? [temptation to follow the god of politics, wealth, status, free time, comfort, education]

Elijah invites the prophets of Baal to go first. He taunts them as they 'do their religious thing' to no avail. Did you notice how, as Baal does not answer, his followers get increasingly worked up – "doing more and more" to get Baal's attention? Again, let's put ourselves in the middle of this moment. How might we be guilty of relating to God like this? How might we buy into 'do-more-for-God-to-get-His-attention' religious approach?

So after all of the waiting and walking, the crying out and cutting themselves, Baal does not answer or show up. They're humiliated and confused, and more than a little worried.

Now it's Yahweh's turn. The first thing Elijah does is rebuild the altar that has been torn down (1 Kings 18:30). It's time to re-create a holy place for the people of God. He uses "Twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came saying, 'Israel shall be your name.' " (1 Kings 18:31) In other words, Elijah grounds this present moment in the God who was present throughout Israel's past. Then he digs a deep trench around the altar, stacks the wood in place, prepares the bull and – just to make it clear the altar and sacrifice can't catch fire through any possible human means – [Elijah] douses the bull, wood and altar with more water than many of them had seen in a long time.

The rest is pretty awesome and powerful. Yahweh wins! Baal loses! And it's time to wrap up the sermon. But this isn't a sermon series on the "idols" of our lives and culture. If it was, I'd just roll out three modern-day idols and challenge us to 'stop limping around between multiple allegiances.' But that's not why I picked this passage. We're talking about how God alters our lives at the altars of our lives. So I've got to ask a different question?

How did this moment at the altar transform Elijah? Change him? I know how it changes the lives of the prophets of Baal and Asherah; they went from alive to not-so-alive, which is different than "from one degree of glory to another." But does it change Elijah? We can only know the answer to this question by reading further.

Let me summarize what follows in chapters 18 and 19: Rain comes. The long drought is over. Ahab's life is spared, and he runs to Jezebel to tell her what happened. She then sends word to Elijah that she'll do to him what he's done to her prophets within the next 24 hours.

And this part is a little surprising. When Elijah hears Jezebel's threats, he runs for his life. He's afraid?! The guy who called down fire from heaven and taunted almost 1,000 religious leaders is afraid of a foreign queen? Didn't that spectacular event on Mt. Carmel change him even "one

degree of glory"? I don't know, but it might not have been that life-altering, because once Elijah hears Jezebel is after him, he flees to the wilderness a day's journey and declares to God he's ready to give up. He actually asks God to end his life. He goes from a spiritual high on Mt. Carmel to an emotional low. Does this surprise you at all? Has it ever happened to you?

Is Elijah depressed? Is he overstating the problem? He says, "I'm no better off than my ancestors." (1 Kings 19:4) So he puts his head down (to die) only to be awakened by an angel, who provides warm bread and plenty of water. He eats and drinks, and goes back to sleep. And the angel comes again and rouses him from his sleep with more to eat and drink.

[This is just a little commercial about how a short nap and healthy snack can alter/altar us in significant ways; a little reminder that our spiritual life is not disconnected from our biological life; that so many bad decisions have been made by followers of Christ who are exhausted, undernourished, and dehydrated. Transformation doesn't happen in a vacuum. Don't ignore what your body needs to stay healthy. End of commercial.]

Elijah gets a bunch of rest and a bunch of food/water, and now he's ready for the next leg of the journey. He travels 40 days and 40 nights to meet and hear from God on Mt. Horeb/Sinai. He's the first one back to this place since Moses met God on this mountaintop altar long ago. But it feels like Elijah's still a little off; frustrated and fearful; creating an exaggerated picture of what's going on. "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." (1 Kings 19:10) He still needs an attitude adjustment. He needs to be altar-ed.

So God decides to bless Elijah in a very different way than He did on Mt. Carmel; with His very presence. Let's remember: Elijah has witnessed fire coming down from heaven leading to a big victory, drought-ending rainfall, and food provided supernaturally from an angel. But he's still not fully transformed, which is a good reminder that the miraculous and spectacular aren't always as transformative as we might think.

God has a different, life-altering tool up His sleeve. He tells Elijah He's about to pass by. And this announcement is followed by a great wind, a tumultuous earthquake, and a raging fire. Then we read this: "But the Lord was not in the wind . . . but the Lord was not in the earthquake . . . but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence." (1 Kings 19:11-12) Other translations call it a "still small voice" or "gentle whisper." Then it says, "And when Elijah heard it he went out to meet God." (1 Kings 19:13) Somehow, Elijah knew how to tell the difference between the spectacular and the silent. He knew when God showed up.

But we are less comfortable with silence, smallness, and whispers; and less familiar with it in our spiritual lives. We are drawn to the more active and articulate; the more public and pronounced; the big and the bright; the loud and the lavish. We are, aren't we?

One pastor put it like this: "We have fallen upon a generation of fuss, and bustle, and trumpet-blowing, and advertising. It would almost seem as if many of us believed that we were to take the world by storm . . . We have more faith in the whirlwind and the earthquake than in the still small voice." (W.M. Taylor, *Contrary Winds*) Guess what, Taylor was a pastor in the mid to late 1800's! Talk about prophetic!

We are changed/alterd in so many ways, "from one degree of glory to another." And that can include victorious moments, memorable events, and exciting episodes. But I'm learning – very slowly – that God's most consistent and transformative work happens very quietly; and in very quiet moments when we can actually hear Him speak through His Word and by His Spirit. If only we would learn to slow down and listen.

[This is what we continue to use Emotionally Healthy Spirituality as a discipleship tool, encouraging Silence, Sabbath, Stillness and Solitude]

Ted Loder is another person who has helped me pay attention to God's presence in silence. Loder is the one who wrote the prayer our leaders have shared with many of you entitled, "Do Something Essential in Me." Here's another prayer of his called "Help Me Listen"

"O Holy One,
I hear and say so many words,
yet Yours is the word I need.
Speak now,
and help me listen;
and, if what I hear is silence,
 let it quiet me,
 let it disturb me,
 let it touch my need,
 let it break my pride,
 let it shrink my certainties,
 let it enlarge my wonder."

(Ted Loder in *Guerillas of Grace*)

Would we be willing to get quiet in our souls and lives in order to better hear from God?
Can we help each other create space to discover some of life's less-spectacular altars and moments of transformation? How might God want to altar us – collectively and individually?

May we recognize His the presence of God when He shows up and speaks – even if He doesn't say a word.

Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion

1. In what ways do we vacillate between allegiance to God and various idols in our lives? What are your top three, go-to idols?
2. How might we be guilty of relating to God like the prophets of Baal? How might we buy into a 'do-more-for-God-to-get-His-attention' religious approach?
3. Are you surprised by Elijah's fear of Queen Jezebel? Do any of your fears surprise you?
4. Have you been altar-ed more by the quiet and persistent work of God in your life, or through more dramatic, large-scale moments and movements?
5. What are 2-3 practical ways you could bring more silence and stillness into your life with God? What do you think you might hear from God if you quieted down?
6. Would we be willing to get quiet in our souls and lives in order to better hear from God? Can we help each other create space to discover some of life's less-spectacular altars and moments of transformation?
7. What does this passage have to say about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?