

Theology 201 - The sound of sheer silence (1 Kings 19.1-17)

Pentecost 2

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Two mountains dominate the landscape of the prophet Elijah's story. The first, Mount Carmel, is where famously he does battle with the prophets of Baal. The second, Mount Horeb, is where fearfully he flees to escape the wrath of Queen Jezebel. In the course of leaving Carmel and arriving on Horeb, Elijah undergoes a profound transformation of perspective, a deeply personal theological education that involves at heart what my friend, theologian James Alison, calls the collapse of the false sacred (2001:30) - that is, the unmasking of a form of religion that justifies zealotry and violence in God's name. So, what led to the change? In this reflection on Elijah's journey, let's explore this a little further.

Elijah, as we heard, lived in Israel in the time of King Ahab. Ahab was a compromised and failed leader, according to the Book of Kings, because he'd forsaken Yahweh for the worship of Baal, the fertility god of his wife Jezebel. Ironically, as a consequence, a severe drought had enveloped Israel (1 Kings 18). Three years into this famine, the country on its knees, Elijah met with Ahab to sort him and the problem out. Believing the issue was to do with false worship, he orchestrated a competition designed to draw everyone back to Yahweh, a competition to prove the superiority of Yahweh. Here's how it went.

Ahab was instructed to call all Israel and the prophets of Baal to gather at Mount Carmel. Two bulls are slaughtered and the plan is that each party will set a sacrifice on their altar and then call on their god to consume it. 'The god

who answers by fire', Elijah declares (to the approval of the people), 'is indeed god' (18.24).

The prophets of Baal launch into it with enthusiasm, but nothing seems to be happening... Their prayers become increasingly desperate and Elijah mocks from the sidelines: *Call out in a louder voice*, he jibes sarcastically, *perhaps he's chatting or relieving himself or off on a journey, or asleep*. They continue in evermore frenzied pleading, raving and cutting themselves, but still 'no voice, no answer, no response'. Then comes Elijah's turn, and he deliberately and symbolically repairs the desecrated altar of Yahweh and lays the wood and digs a trench and then soaks it three times with water. You can feel the drama building. Finally, when all is ready, he calls on the Lord and *kaboom* - lightning strikes and the whole lot is consumed. The stunned crowd falls to the ground, crying: *'The Lord is the true God'*, and seizing the moment with glee, Elijah orders all 450 prophets of Baal to be slaughtered. It's an impressive, decisive and bloodthirsty triumph, and to cap it off, soon thereafter the drought breaks!!

Well, we might expect Elijah to be on a high after this, but in the sequel, as we read, he falls flat and fearful. Far from being convinced by these antics, Jezebel is enraged. In fear of his life, Elijah flees into the wilderness, where exhausted and morose he sits under a solitary broom tree wishing he could die. Twice an angel comes with food and water. Twice he is commanded to arise and eat, and then, in the strength of this, he journeys for forty days and nights to Horeb – the mountain where, centuries before, Moses had met with God. When he gets to Horeb he hides in a cave. The word of God comes to him, asking what he's doing there, and he replies: *'I've 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' (19:10).

Now, it's true, it hasn't been easy for those faithful to Yahweh since Ahab and Jezebel have been in power but it's not true that Elijah is the only one left. In previous chapters, we've heard of 100 faithful prophets being hidden and supported by a man called Obadiah. Elijah isn't totally alone but, as any who've struggled with let-down and depression will testify, it's easy in this place to become negative and totalizing about our predicament.

At the same time, as Elijah's experience testifies, being in this 'close to cracking' (Alison) place can bring new insight and awareness. Well, we heard the story; God declares that he's about to pass by, and a new drama unfolds: First, a great wind rends the mountains and breaks the rocks. It's all very impressive but '*the Lord was not in the wind*'. Next, a powerful earthquake, but '*the Lord was not in the earthquake*'. Next a fire, but '*the Lord was not in the fire*'. And then ... '*a sound of sheer silence*' (NRSV), '*minute stillness*' (Alter 2013:708) ... When Elijah 'hears' *this*, he covers his face and stands at the entrance of the cave. And, in that place, he hears again: '*Elijah, what are you doing here?*' He repeats his previous answer: '*I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant* (and blah, blah...), and God seems as unaffected as last time. Rather than being extolled a heroic warrior and exemplar, Elijah is dispatched on a couple of routine prophetic tasks (including appointing his own successor). In the process, he is rather matter-of-factly reminded that he's not the only one left, that there are seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed to Baal. It's all a bit anti-climactic, so what to make of it?

In Alison's reading (which I find deeply illuminating), what seems to be a story of the triumph of Yahwism is really presented more as the story of the 'un-deceiving of Elijah' (2001:29). On Mount Carmel, Elijah sees himself as a champion fighter, zealous for God and God's name. On Mount Carmel he sets up a battle between two rival deities in order to prove that his god is superior. It's theology 101 in most religions - my god is bigger than your god, and it's had a devastating effect on humanity. In the course of this rivalry, he has no qualms about humiliating and murdering his opponents. On Carmel, he is self-confident, mocking, and secure in his righteousness. And yet, after this bloody victory, he sinks into depression and doubt. *'It is enough; now, O Lord, [he says] take away my life'* (18.4). What follows is a time of exhaustion and heart-break, a time in which his theological and personal understanding is changing, maturing. And by the time he gets to Horeb, what's emerging is a very different perspective on what it means to be zealous on God's behalf.

If the Carmel episode is all about a religiosity of rivalry and domination, of scapegoating and destroying in the name of God, then Horeb signifies the undoing of such theology and activity. According to Alison (2001:29), *'all the commotion around Mount Horeb is presented as something rather like a deconstruction of the [violent] sacred scenario ... , for the Lord was present in the still small voice, rather than in something of more imposing majesty'*. On Carmel, Elijah saw himself as in rivalry with the prophets of Baal - as competing at the same level. By the end of his time on Horeb, by way of the cracking open of his heart, a still small voice which operates at an entirely different level has begun to reach him.

Elijah's role in relation to this still small voice is considerably more self-effacing than his previous persona. Now he must live as a listener, humbly

playing his part in a larger story, serving the God who has no interest in sacred rivalry, magic and manipulation, the God who does not need to be zealously promoted or defended. A similar process of theological learning and growth is undergone by St Paul. Like Elijah, Paul was full of religious zeal, righteously persecuting those he perceived to be God's enemies. And, like Elijah, Paul is utterly undone by a 'still small' voice - the questioning of the crucified and risen Christ: '*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*' His zeal unmasked, he realizes that violent defensiveness is not the service God wants. It's a false understanding of the sacred and what it means to prove our faithfulness.

And what of us, and the contemporary scene? Religiously justified violence remains horribly active in our world. Sometimes the violence is overt, e.g. ISIS, Boko Haram, the Taliban and various brands of fundamentalism. Sometimes it's more covert - self-righteous posturing, a tendency to judge and render irrelevant those who disagree with us. In truth, wherever religious zeal legitimates judgementalism and violence, the false sacred is at work, operating at the level of our fears and projections - liberating no one, transforming nothing. In this story, we glimpse the possibility of another way; it involves a gradual liberation from our own violent and self-righteous tendencies, as we learn to hear God's still small voice - the voice which speaks most fully in Jesus, as he undergoes and breaks the cycle of human violence to set us free. Learning to hear, living as a listener - with a humble and contrite heart - that, Elijah discovers, is how true zeal for God is enacted.

References

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