

Sermon: May 29, 2016 – 1 Kings 18: 20-40
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore, AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

As a person of faith, I would be delighted if the Bible contained only sunshine and light.

The story of creation is so beautifully crafted, declaring each wondrous aspect to be good in the eyes of the creator... yet within a generation of the story of Adam, Eve and the Garden of Eden is the cold blooded murder of Abel by the hands of his brother Cain, and the Bible didn't leave that story out.

The story of the Exodus, the enslaved Hebrew people freed from their bondage has brought hope to centuries of exploited people, but that same story of the Exodus includes a series of plagues unleashed on the Egyptian peasants, and a wall of water intentionally dropped on the Egyptian chariots, killing scores of men and horses who were basically doing their jobs.

And then we have the Ministry of our Saviour. I love it when Jesus says, "blessed are the peacemakers," when he heals a woman bent low for years, when he tells a Parable about the detested Samaritans and turns it around so the Samaritan is the good guy... but within a couple of years Christ was killed by being nailed to a cross, and in the scuffle to take him into custody Peter draws his sword and slices off a Roman slave's ear. Violence was both received and enacted by the disciples.

As I see it there are a few strategies that could be employed to get around the violence that repeatedly messes up the good stories in scripture:

Avoidance is always good. I can reduce the Bible to only the nice bits, either by closing my eyes and ears to the rest of the story, or by just cutting out the bits I don't like, or by just putting scripture on the sidelines altogether and replacing it with loose cultural interpretations of what it means to be a "good person".

I could say that anything involving violence or deceit is "back there" and it was all solved by Jesus, but I don't think that's how Jesus, a faithful Jew, approached the sacred stories he learned as a boy.

I could go the other direction and say that the violence is all justified, that everyone who gets smoked in the Bible had it coming to them... and risk sounding very much like the Boko Haram or ISIS, who take their scriptures and interpret them that way.

Or, now and then at least, I can *engage* stories like the big, showy, violent events of 1st Kings 18, and attempt to see what possible lessons we can learn from it. Admittedly, I wouldn't be keen to do that every week, but in order to preach the stuff I like I also have to preach the stuff that makes me squirm.

And 1st Kings 18 definitely makes me squirm – not just because of the aggressive trash-talking of Elijah, not just because of the black hat/white hat portrayal of a god named Baal that was capable of doing basically nothing, versus Yahweh, the perfect and all-powerful God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I don't like those aspects of the story, but 1st Kings 18 makes me squirm primarily because of a verse conveniently left out by the lectionary – verse 40, one verse after the appointed end point of the reading.

In its shorter, happier form, the story ends with everyone cheering because the God of Israel had decisively defeated the competition. The evidence presented by this great contest brought people back to their senses, reminding them that they had been led astray by an easy and seductive religious system and now it was time to come home to the God of their ancestors.

But the incident at Mount Carmel actually ends one verse later, with these chilling words: "Elijah commanded them, 'Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!' They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered them there." While I understand why that extra verse usually gets dropped– and, indeed, chose to end the dramatic reading at verse 39 – I also value the honesty of facing up to whole story, not just the sanitized version. Yahweh won the contest, hooray!...and then Elijah killed the losers.

So what in the world does this incident at Mount Carmel – all the way to its gory conclusion - have to say to us today?

I am reminded of a story from when I worked at the school. We shared a building with another program that had a much older student population than ours, so we hired security guards – basically hall monitors - to help keep the two groups in their proper parts of the building. I was sitting in on the job interviews, and the prospective candidate, a new Canadian, was asked,

“what would you do if a child started insulting you, or speaking rudely to you or to another staff member?” He paused for just a moment and said in his developing English, “I’d want to find out what else had been going on in the child’s day in order to understand why they would speak in that way.” (Good answer and yes, we did hire him and didn’t regret it for a second.)

In order to understand why the 18th chapter of 1st Kings would need to tell such a dramatic, violent story we would do well to find out what else had been going on in the history of Israel, to know why things came to a head in this way. So if we scan back a few chapters, 1st Kings gives us an appalling, almost hilarious history of one shmuck after another who ascended to the throne, cataloguing their sins and the calamities that befell them as a result.

It reached its lowest point in the monarchy of Ahab. Here these words from 1st Kings 16: 30-33 – “Ahab ...did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of these before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of [his fathers before him], but he also married Jezebel daughter of [the] king of Sidon, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab ... did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him.”

How’s that for a letter of reference?

While I am tempted to look at this through 21st century eyes and say, gee, Bible writer, you should have been a bit more tolerant, not everything done in the name of religion is automatically worth supporting, and I don’t think that there was much reason to open the doors to Baal worship. Baal was part of the Canaanite religious system, a secondary deity under the god El. Baal was a fertility god – crop fertility and human fertility- that also controlled the weather: rainfall, sunshine and storms. Rural folk would find Baal attractive as they prayed for optimal agricultural conditions, and unlike Yahweh, the Master and Creator of all, you could make deals with Baal.

There were already Baal worshippers in Israel, in fact it was reasonably widespread in the agricultural areas, and generally tolerated. What changed with Ahab is that he and Jezebel were active evangelists for Baal, and there was nothing gentle or subtle about it: Jezebel had ordered that the Israelite priests and prophets be rounded up and extinguished. A religious war was on, and it wasn’t started by Yahweh.

Much as I like to think that most things can be negotiated in a calm, rational, sensible manner, sometimes you have to take a stand – and that time had arrived for Elijah, literally the last man standing when it came to priests and prophets speaking on behalf of Yahweh, the maker of heaven and earth. For me, that significantly changes the dramatic, insulting confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, which I had always seen as an aggressive action by Elijah rather than a last-ditch effort to keep the word of God alive in the land. And I have to say, it was rather clever to challenge a deity of thunder and lightning to a contest involving fire from the sky. But even with my new understanding about the back story behind this big, showy event, I still wonder about the stark, “kill them all” command at the end.

Edwina Gateley, a Roman Catholic Missionary and essayist, has written a most helpful essay on this scripture. Perhaps I found it helpful because she followed pretty much exactly the same line of logic that I did, and I’m always happy to find allies. In her essay she quotes evidence from several scholars, suggesting that there is good reason to believe that the event itself is a fanciful reconstruction, written five hundred years after the fact. The story was written in a later time when religions were starting to dilute and blend, to convey one central moral message: you can’t have it both ways. You are with God or you are against God and if you choose to be with God, you will often find yourself outnumbered about as seriously as Elijah was, 450 to 1.

And while I agree with that conclusion, I am still left with the nagging question: even if I see this as a dramatic presentation rather than historic reconstruction, why tell the story at all? Much like my distaste at “shoot-em-up” video games or the proliferation of graphic, fiery violence on the silver screen, there are some stories that just don’t need to be told whether they are fact or fiction. Elijah had proven his point already, why have him kill his opponents, even if it is just a story?

Earlier we looked at what happened *before* this event, to understand it better. A wise theologian named Frederick Buechner advises us to keep reading, because what happens *afterward* also sheds light on things. Buechner reminds me that while the decisive win at Mount Carmel may appear to be the climax of the story, the story hadn’t actually ended yet.

Needless to say, Ahab and Jezebel were none too pleased with what had happened at Mount Carmel, and Elijah knew it. He went into hiding at Mount Horeb, his life under direct threat from the Queen and then this happened: (1 Kings 19: 9-12)

“behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him...’Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord.’ And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, a still small voice.”

Ah, the still small voice of calm. After this great demonstration of power, a huge fireball from heaven devouring everything and Elijah eliminating further opposition, we have God saying to Elijah: here in the silence, this is where you really find me. The noise and the fire and the sideshow got people’s attention and brought them back to their senses, but that’s not where I am found. This is.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, looking back at this story that was part of his faith history and mine, this is where I find this story intersecting with mine: not in the all-consuming fire of holy retribution, but in the wee flickering flame of hope and life and love that burns in my heart, the still small voice of calm that keeps me standing upright in the midst of the storms, the presence that I interpret as the Christ-light burning within me.

Faithfulness to God is a complex thing, and the reality throughout history is that if you are being faithful you’re just about always going to be outnumbered. At times, that leads us to doubt whether God really has anything relevant to say because not many are saying it, and Elijah expresses those doubts in his prayer after the prophets of Baal had failed in their task and it was his turn: “answer me, Lord, so these people will know that you are God and that you are turning their hearts back to you again.” The pyrotechnic show was never the point of the matter; winning hearts was what mattered to Elijah and his God. Fire raining from the sky caught their attention of the crowd, but in the long run, only the still small voice of calm could capture their lives. In the words of the old hymn, Lead on, O King Eternal, “for not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums, but deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes.” The loud stuff has its place, but God’s agenda rests on love, inclusion and forgiveness, not punishment and victory.

Whether I am reflecting on my own life’s story or the story of my faith family, it’s important for me to be open to the whole thing, to “own it all”. I need to be honest about the back story, the precursors that give context for the present; and on those occasions when I can recognize what’s coming *next*, I need to wade into that with courage as well. I can’t slough off the tough stuff and pretend it isn’t there, and I can’t oversell my ability to always make good choices, for my life and my religious tradition simply don’t work that way. At least they don’t if I’m being true and honest and human. In his daily devotionals, Richard Rohr is always warning me about duality, the tendency to divide reality into the good things, which coincidentally happen to be my preferences, and the bad things, which either belong to someone else or become an enemy for me to fight against, and that’s what I’m trying to get at as well: I am healthiest as a person and as a believer when I have the courage to embrace the full story, the before and the after, the proud moments and the humiliating goof-ups, the great choices and the disastrous.

And so I take 1st Kings 18 for what it is:

- A story of apostasy, with the King of Israel motivated by something other than God’s claim on his life;
- A story of threat, where all that Elijah has left is his reliance on God;
- A story of everyone’s need to choose, between what’s popular and what could actually feed their souls;
- A story of God’s power, and the human tendency to take that one step too far;
- A story of seeking sanctuary in the safety of mountains, and the presence of God in the stillness.

In the stories that cut us to the heart, and the stories that enfold us like a hug, may our shared story of the ages feed your story as it unfolds, this day and every day. Amen.

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Postscript:

From Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993, pp. 29-30:

"[On Mount Carmel Elijah] was like a magician getting ready to pull a rabbit out of a hat. First he had a trench dug around the altar and filled with water. Then he got a bucket brigade going to give the offering a good dowsing, too. Then as soon as they'd finished, he got them to do it again for good measure. By the time they'd finished a third go-round, the whole place was awash, and Elijah looked like he'd just finished swimming the channel. He then gave Yahweh the word to show his stuff and jumped back just in time. Lightning flashed. The water in the trench fizzed like spit on a hot stove. Nothing was left of the offering but a pile of ashes and a smell like the Fourth of July. The onlookers were beside themselves with enthusiasm and at a signal from Elijah, demolished the losing team down to the last prophet. Nobody could say whose victory had been greater, Yahweh's or Elijah's.

But the sequel to the event seems to have made this clear. Queen Jezebel was determined to get even with Elijah for what he had done to her spiritual advisers, and so to save his skin he went and hid on Mt. Horeb. Again, he gave Yahweh the word, not because he wanted anything set on fire this time but just to keep his hand in. Again the lightning flashed, and after that a wind came up that almost blew Elijah off his feet, and after that the earth gave such a shake that it almost knocked him silly. But there wasn't so much as a peep out of Yahweh, and Elijah stood there like a ringmaster when the lion won't jump through the hoop.

Only when the fireworks were finished and a terrible hush fell over the mountain did Elijah hear something, and what he heard was so much like silence that it was only through the ear of faith that he knew it was Yahweh. Nonetheless, the message came through loud and clear: that there was no longer any question who had been the star at Mount Carmel and that not even Elijah could make the Lord God of Hosts jump through a hoop like a lion or pop out like a rabbit from a hat."

- cited by Doug Bratt at: http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-4c/?type=old_testament_lectionary#sthash.LZCEkpln.dpuf