

On Being Afraid

Bless us oh Lord and these thy gifts: bless the listening and bless the speaking. Guide us in the gift of words, that we may serve thy holy will, this day and forever more, amen.

First Presbyterian Church, Wilmette
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I Kings 19:1-19a
Psalm 122
Matt 6: 19-34

What are you doing here?

No, I'm not quoting Scripture. I'm asking you a question. Why are you here?

It used to be that going to church was an ordinary and expected part of middle-class life. Going to church was like going to get your hair cut at reasonable intervals, like fertilizing the lawn or going to open-house at the kids' schools. People just did it. Everybody did it. You didn't need a reason for being here. Going to church was simply part of being respectable. It was expected of fine upstanding folks, just as membership in relevant professional organizations is expected. And if the reading was tedious and company dull, well, that was just something that ambitious people put up with--cheerfully. But that expectation has been dropped, and church membership has dropped with it.

Some people are terribly alarmed by that fact. I'm not. I'm convinced that western Christianity faces not a crisis but an extraordinary opportunity. Going to church is no longer simply the decent and respectable thing that everyone does, without thinking about it, without having any reason at all. That's wonderful! That means that every single one of us does have a reason for being here--even if we are not quite sure what those reasons are. One way or the other, here we are, and so it's up to us what kind of place this might become. Going to church has its best chance in centuries to become something important, something valuable and meaningful in our lives--not simply one of the decent and proper habits of suburban life.

So again the question: what are we doing here?

That's the question Elijah hears in the First Book of Kings, the question asked--and repeated--by the still small voice. Ahab was king of Israel in those days; Jezebel was his queen. And the two of them worship Ba'al, not Yahweh. On the one hand, Ba'al was a specific Canaanite god who was in charge of rain, thunder, and lightening. But on the other hand, local gods who presided over the fertility of particular places were also called Ba'al. You could have one Ba'al for the twelve million acres of corn in Illinois. Call him Ba'al-Illini. And another for the vineyards of the Sonoma Valley in California: Ba'al-Sonoma. Ba'al-Wisconsin watched over the dairy herds. And so forth. In the ancient world--all over the ancient world, in fact, except among the Jews--the smart farmer sacrificed to the local fertility gods just as carefully as the modern farmer boots his computer and checks the latest weather-satellite photos or commodities reports. Tension between the worship of the Ba'als and the worship of Yahweh runs all through the Old Testament: planting a field or a vineyard without sacrifice to Baal was about as wise as developing a new product without market research or failing to read the prospectus before sending money. The Jews might worship Yahweh, sure; but especially when times were tough they seemed not particularly inclined to leave practical matters in His hands.

Nor are we. When I was a little girl, in an absolutely conventional, respectable church of the 1950s, I was taught to pray as if everything depended upon God but to work as if everything depended on me. What that meant, finally, was to work as if everything depended upon me and then to fall into bed exhausted. To make my own ambitious, highly disciplined, very careful sacrifice to Ba'al. "Depending on God" was nothing more than pious platitude. "Behold the lilies of the field" and all that was fine sentiment--but ultimately only that, only sentiment. Shrewd people, successful people, worked hard and watched out for the deceits of sentimentality.

So whenever you hear about Baal, think about ambition. Think about how much people sacrifice to their own careers: the hours, the travel, the stress, the

costs to our families and to the development of our children. There's a lot there to think about. And there always has been, in every human culture, and that's why the rivalry between Baal and Yahweh still makes for such a great story. Centuries later, Jesus is still telling that same story, trying, still trying to convince us that trusting God is not utter foolishness but rather the difficult, complicated key to our redemption from anxiety and greed. And millenias later, we are still trapped, still struggling with anxiety and with depression and with greed, still feeling trapped and still trying to prove ourselves, to prove ourselves to Ba'al.

At any rate, the story tells us that Ahab did more than all the kings of Israel before him to provoke the anger of the Lord. He built shrines. He invented cellular phones and voice mail and fax machines. Performance reviews and downsizing. And so the prophet Elijah declares a drought: for three years there has been neither rain nor dew nor even FedEx overnight. The situation is grim and it is very very tense. Elijah is a wanted man, a hunted man, a hated man. Ahab and Jezebel take to murdering the priests of Yahweh, but Elijah hides in the countryside with the anonymous "widow of Jarephath."

In a crucial scene, Elijah emerges from the little town of Jarephath to propose a contest to end the drought; the desperate king of a dying kingdom agrees to it. You may know the story: Elijah and the priests of Ba'al each set up altars on Mount Carmel. On each altar they pile up some wood and then sacrifice a bull. The priests of Ba'al pray all morning long for Ba'al to set the wood ablaze & consume the sacrifice, but nothing happens. "There was no voice," the story goes, "there was no answer, and no response." The Canaanite god of rain doesn't end the drought.

Well, Elijah--always a man for the dramatic touch--soaks his wood in water and digs a trench around his altar and fills the trench with water. He prays, and Yahweh sends down fire to ignite the wood, roast the bull, and lick up every drop of water from that trench around the altar. Elijah directs the angry mob of starving Israelites to seize all the priests of Baal--which they do--and drag them down off Mount Carmel to a stream that has run dry because of the drought. There Elijah

himself murders each one of them. And shortly thereafter the rains begin. But Queen Jezebel is outraged. She vows to kill Elijah "by this time tomorrow."

In short, it's the usual blood-and-thunder Biblical story, reeking with violence and revenge. This is X-rated stuff: under 17 not admitted. "Theologically embarrassing," as they say. This is the sort of blood-vengeance that gives rise to what we have seen in Bosnia, in Rwanda, in Cambodia or in Northern Ireland. If the story stopped here, I'd conclude that this is certainly not a God who would get me out of my bed early on a Sunday morning.

But the story does not end on this note. It continues. Fearing for his life, Elijah runs away again.

In fact, he travels forty days through the wilderness back to Mount Horeb. Do you know what Mount Horeb is? It's another name for Mount Sinai. And you remember Mount Sinai, yes? That's where the Ten Commandments were handed down. That's where Yahweh and the Israelites established their covenant after the Egyptian army drowned in the Red Sea. It's a famous place in Jewish history and in the landscape of Jewish storytelling. When Elijah goes back to Sinai, it's as if Washington were sneaking alone back across the Delaware in fear of his life, as if Paul Revere were slinking despondently through the Concord woods back into Boston, with blood on his hands and despair in his heart that the British have triumphed after all. And so Elijah. Fed by the angels, he goes back to Sinai, back to the origin of Israel's relationship with God. He goes back in despair that his own success on Mount Carmel is pointless, futile, meaningless.

I've had nights like that. I've watched success turn to ashes in my hands. That's not an uncommon experience, not an uncommon experience at all, especially not in a community like this one where there are so very many people who have been so successful in so many different fields. Lots of us--lots of us--know exactly what Elijah is feeling. You can succeed, you can win--and still feel as if you are losing your life. Elijah's life is on the line literally here, of course. Jezebel does plan to kill him.

And the word of the Lord comes to him, we are told, and God asks "What are you doing here?" Elijah has quite an answer. "They are trying to kill me!" he says. As indeed they are. And what follows is a lesson in theology, a tough lesson, a brilliant lesson. "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord," Elijah is instructed, "for the Lord is about to pass by." And so he goes out.

And there is a volcanic eruption and an earthquake, as there was when the Ten Commandments were handed down. But God is not in the volcano nor in the earthquake. And there is a fire, as there was a fire in the bush that summoned Moses, as there was fire on Mount Carmel in Elijah's contest with the priests of Ba'al. But God is not in the fire. Oh really? We need to stop here a minute and be incredulous. And not just incredulous. Scandalized, perhaps. God is not in any of this physical violence and power? What about the social violence and the social power exercised in God's name? What in God's name is going on here?

And then there is a still small voice. And the still small voice asks exactly the same question that Elijah has already heard: What are you doing here, Elijah? The usual Biblical commentaries dismiss the fact that we have heard this question before. They say it is a clerical error of some sort. In fact, some translations drop one or the other accounts of the question.

Have you ever walked in on your kids in the midst of something and asked "what is going on here," and they reply "oh nothing, Ma," all innocence and big eyes? Oh nothing, says the kid. "We are not doing anything." Or, "Oh, we're just doing homework, really, a research project" and click goes the mouse. And then the grownup stands up a little straighter and asks exactly the same question a second time, this time with a deeper and louder voice, "what is going on here?"

Well, that's what God is doing to Elijah. "What's going on here?" God asks a second time, and Elijah says, for the second time, "they are trying to kill me, that's all, really, that's all." Yeah, sure. Right. Tell me. Plain as day, Elijah has not answered with the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. If all Elijah really wanted was to hide, why had he come all the way back to Mount Sinai? Why not go back to Jarephath, where he was hiding before? Why come so far?

And why all the help from angels to get here? Nah. Something more is going on here.

And why do we come all the way back to these ancient stories week after week? What are we looking for? What is missing in our lives? Or what are we finding here? I don't mean your usual excuse for coming, like maybe it's your turn to usher or you think your kids needs Sunday school. No. I want the straight dope. Why are you here?

The story does not tell us exactly why Elijah has come to Mount Sinai. We are not told. As the scholar Robert Alter demonstrates, the Jewish storytellers do this to us all the time. They get us to these moments of incredible tension, and then they walk away or they skip ahead. And the point of that is to drive us crazy. The point of that is to make us identify with the silent character so powerfully that we will answer for him. The Jewish storytellers are some of the very finest artists this planet has known, and they know their trade. They create a world in which God is absolutely real, they trap us into imagining our own way into that world, and then they sit back, confident that God is still God, all these thousands of years later, and so we will know in our own hearts what God is up with to with Elijah-- because we too have been there and done that, in our own lives and in our own ways.

Well, if you were Elijah, what would you say? If you were Elijah, why would you have schlepped all the way back to Mount Sinai? Think about that a minute. This is delicate stuff, so let's not hurry.

At the very least, Elijah runs to Sinai--he flees the country--because he loses his nerve when Jezebel vows to murder him. Maybe God can roast a bull, maybe God can raise the crucified Jesus--but y'know, my problems are bigger.

I have a son--he wants to be an engineer--and he is applying for college this year. I don't know what I'll do if he doesn't get into MIT. And I'm sure don't know what I will do if he does get in: we can't afford it. Don't tell me to pray! Prayers won't pay tuition! My best friend just found out she has breast cancer. Roast

bull? Right. Give me a break. Elijah isn't just afraid for his life. He is afraid that God himself cannot cope with Jezebel.

At a deeper level yet, Elijah has a point. He is in danger. And God did not intervene to save all those other priests of Yahweh. All of them died. And Jesus will die. And someday I will die. And maybe someday soon my friend will die of cancer. Or my son will get turned down at MIT, and I'm suspect he thinks that will kill him too. There is very poor scriptural warrant for any claim that God will guarantee our success or even our survival. In fact, the burden of proof goes the other way. God may be omnipotent, but that omnipotence doesn't seem to get much exercise making life easier for any one of us in any specific material way. As Teresa of Avila complained to God, "if this is how your Lordship treats his friends, no wonder your Lordship has so few of them."

Elijah is beginning to feel like one of us, isn't he? But let's keep going. Why does he go to Sinai? Why is he going back to the original landscape of the promise between God and the Jews? Well, you go back to the start of things when you need to start over. And you need to start over when you have made a mistake, or when you have lost your way, or when you are feeling confused about your priorities. Is Elijah feeling lost and confused? Is that why he came to Sinai? Is that why he is here?

Is that why we are here? Are we here because we too have lost our nerve, lost our way, because we are confused and we are afraid--afraid of Ba'al, afraid of Jezebel, afraid of where our lives are going?

Maybe so. Maybe there was something out of line in Elijah's declaring a drought, in his zero-sum game with the Canaanite god of rain. Or something wrong in his contest on Mount Carmel, in his trying to fight fire with fire and then murdering the priest of Baal in revenge for the murder of the priests of Yahweh. Maybe there is something just a bit dubious in his portraying Yahweh as Ba'al's rival in controlling material success, when Yahweh is something more than that. Yahweh's command is not "live long and prosper." That's what the fertility gods are all about. Yahweh's command is not "live long and prosper" but "Love God

with your whole heart and your neighbor as yourself." Love. Not a predictable harvest, not a high profit margin, not a growing market share, but love.

I think that Elijah would understand our world. He would have sympathized with our frustration that here we are, doing our best, but look where it is getting us. Look! Look at how much you have sacrificed, how hard you have worked. But where is your marriage headed? Your career? Your kids? Even your church? Do you wonder sometimes? I sure do. When I was, say, 21, I had an eighty year plan for my life and I knew that nothing would ever stop me. Life felt something like a race or a contest, and I was sure I'd win. Why not? I was omnipotent, omniscient, immortal, invulnerable, and skinny. Sexy, even. Everyone is at that age.

And now? Now I'm not even sure what winning would look like. I'm not sure any more what "success" really means to me, or even if it matters any more. I'm not 21 any more. I'm 47. And I have had some wonderful successes and I have survived some devastating failures, and along the way I have learned that neither success nor failure is as important as I used to think. I still prefer success to failure, you understand. But neither of them feels as important as they used to. What I need is not another fine success but some ordinary serenity, not more pieces of silver but maybe--just maybe--some simple peace of mind.

Elijah isn't just hiding. And neither are we. Elijah goes back to Sinai because he is looking for something. He has won a few fights, and he has lost a few fights, and here he is, wondering if there is some alternative to this whole situation, worrying maybe that somewhere along the line he has lost his integrity, lost touch with what matters most in his life. So Elijah is turning back to the ancient places, to the ancient sources, searching for something. Elijah needs to admit that he is not simply coming here to hide from what scares him. He needs to admit that he is searching for meaning. And so do we.

We all are looking for something more than success. We want more than Baal can provide, more than our careers can offer, more than money can buy and more than prestige can comfort. We have seen the enemy, as Pogo warned, and

he is us. Plenty of us have also seen the view from the tops of our professional fields. And it's pretty bleak. The most successful, the most prominent and eminent people I know are certainly not the happiest. But all of us have sacrificed so very much to get where we are that--like an addict of some sort--we have trouble imagining a life built around anything other than greater and greater sacrifices, longer and longer hours, more and more stress, more and more clients, all of them wanting something done by close of business yesterday. More and more paper piling up on our desks, tempting either God or Ba'al to send down lightning and burn it all to a crisp.

But we keep trying. We keep trying to imagine life on the other side of profit margins and quarterly reports and performance reviews. Like Elijah, we return again and again to the most ancient places, trying to imagine that life has a meaning after all, a meaning that we can trust.

And so we come to church. We sit here, together and alone, hoping somehow for the courage to confront a world in which the bottom line is the only line that matters, a world in which everyone is out for himself and for himself alone, a world in which honor and kindness and generosity are not simply forgotten but actively ridiculed. We come here together, hoping to remember, hoping to find courage and to encourage one another, hoping to find in ourselves and in one another what it means to be made in the image of God. And if we are made by God--not by ourselves--and made in the image of God, then we have nothing to prove to anyone, nothing at all. God is with us, freeing us from anxiety over all the Jezebels waiting at work, welcoming us to a kingdom built not of success but rather serenity, calling us not to prestige and competition but rather to compassion, to service, and above all to hope.

And that's a very dangerous hope. Like Elijah, all of us have so many excuses that come down to "I am afraid." I am afraid of my mistakes. I am afraid of my failures. I am afraid of embarrassing myself. I am afraid of losing, of being unloved, of looking ridiculous, afraid of being different or making a fool of myself. I worry. We all worry. And so we all sacrifice to Ba'al.

The danger is that a God who comforted my fears, a God who took away all my worries, would deprive me of all my excuses. And without my excuses, where would I be? Who would I be? And what might I dare to do? What might I try? There is no way to know. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, we are told, and if you check the footnotes you discover that what they called "mustard" was such a ferocious weed that property owners were required by law to root up any plants that sprouted on their property. That's what will happen to you and to me, once this God sets seed in our soul: God will take over. We will head off into next week in some new way. New life will sprout, life everlasting, new life as bold as dandelions in June.

And that's what we are doing here, whether we come once in a while or whether we come week after week. Somehow or other, seed has set. Something is growing in us, faster or slower, more or less as viruses multiply. We are here in the hope that love will prove mightier than greed, mightier than Ahab and Jezebel together. We are here in the hope that God triumphs in the end over all our petty self-absorbed concern with our own successes and our own failures. We are here because--like Elijah--we have heard that still small voice in the middle of the night, asking us what we are doing with our lives.

Or we are afraid because we have heard that voice and we are afraid of how very deeply we want to believe it is real. We are here to stare at each other, surreptitiously maybe, wondering if anyone else here really believes this stuff. We are here looking for something more than our own success, because we want more in our lives than what money can buy.

And that's what we are doing here. That's why I go to church, and I bet that's why most of you are here too, whether or not you have found the words you need--and the courage you need--to admit that to one another. We are here because we have heard that voice and we are overwhelmed by it. We are overwhelmed with awe, with a weird mix of utter terror and yet absolute fascination at the thought that our lives might be rebuilt upon a new foundation, We are here in hope of alternatives we can as yet barely imagine. We are here to pray that

maybe--just maybe--we have heard the voice of God, that still small voice when we least expect it, perhaps when least we want to be questioned, that little voice asking, "what are you doing here?"

Really now. What are you doing here?"

Amen.