

The Poetics of Preaching: Calling Down Fire

the introduction to a workshop for Chicago-area Presbyterian clergy
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In a contest recounted in the first book of Kings, the prophet Elijah calls down fire to consume a sacrifice and bring an end to drought. We too live in an age of drought and famine, in good measure because we doubt--or we simply do not remember--what it takes to call down fire. In the silence of the churches rise up the petty priests of a New Age, whose concoctions of myth and individualism promise redemption but leave the people starving. But from of old the sacred prophetic task of both priest and poet has been to speak the words that sear us, the words that burn off all we have built up to disguise the immanent power of God. The poet Coleridge laments this loss in his poem "Kubla Khan"

Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny done! those caves of ice!
And all should heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

The poem itself is woven 'round with excuses about dreams and about opium, which Coleridge was using in those days to control both joint pain and cardiac insufficiency brought on by yet-another episode of his chronic and debilitating rheumatic fever. And yet of course the defenses don't work: that's his point. It is one of the most famous, most powerfully witty little poems in the language. He *does* draw us into the visionary landscape he has drawn. He *does* leave us thinking, "whoa, look out for this guy!" Our current out-pouring of attention to narrative in all of its many guises attests, like "Kubla Khan," to the loss of a power

we recover--or begin to recover--in the act of admiring its power and lamenting its near-demise at the hands of expository prose.

And that is God at work, not us. The fire is there: we do not create it. We inherit a tradition alive with live wires, lines waiting to be crossed, to be set up again to spark. John Donne spoke to a generation much like ours when he lamented

The new Philosophy calls all in doubt,
 The element of fire is quite put out;
 The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no mans wit
 Can well direct him where to look for it. . . .
 'Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone;
 All just supply, and all Relation¹

No man's wit can tell him where to look for the earth or for the sun? Ponder that a moment. What is the problem here? Is the problem earth and sky? Or is the problem in our wit, in our dim-witted credulity? The problem, I propose, is in our crediting of arguments that presuppose, from their inception, that there is no such thing as God. The post-modern "project," the ever-clearer project of Western philosophy since the Enlightenment, has been to make sense of a world without God. Theology subordinate to such presuppositions undertakes a bootless quest, albeit an extremely intricate one of the sort that keeps academics quietly employed for decades.

As the Elijah narrative continues, the prophet flees the political uproar set off by his slaughter of the priests of Ba'al; he takes shelter in a cave on Mount Horeb, "the mount of the Lord" elsewhere called Mount Sinai, whence were given the Ten Commandments. In this place, "the word of the Lord came to him" and told him to "stand upon the mount before the Lord. And behold, the Lord passed by . . ." So did wind, and earthquake, and fire; but the narrator tells us that the Lord was not "in" any of these. Oh? God was not "in" the fire that vanquished the priests of Ba'al? Nor, this suggests, was God "in" the burning bush that summoned Moses on this very mountain. Nor, I suppose, was God "in" the earthquake and fire when the law was first proclaimed from this very mountain.

Perhaps what we have here is a proto-Presbyterian redactor: no real presence, mere "representation." Fiery presence belongs to Baptists, whose sermons set the congregation alight, or to Catholics, who claim to call down real presence into the offerings day after day. Mainline Protestants, however, don't play with fire. It makes for soot on the ceiling; it raises the cost of liability insurance for the sanctuary. It

smacks of magic, which embarrasses the scions of Enlightenment religion.

Or perhaps, since this is after all Elijah and on Sinai no less, since this is one of the great and central Biblical narratives, maybe we are to take both scenes at face value. Elijah's fire is indeed the work of God, the gift or grace or manifestation of God; but God and God's actions are nonetheless distinct. God is also manifest to Elijah on the mountain as a "still small voice," a phrase variously translated. But the KJV reading (quite accurate to the Hebrew) has become the famous one.

A "still" voice is not literally silent, or it is no voice at all--except one heard with an inner ear. But the word "still" means also "motionless" or "serene," a resonance picked up by the word "small." In the time of this translation, "small" meant not only "diminutive" but also "thin" or "dilute" as in "small beer." In contrast to the violence of earthquake and wind and fire, this voice speaks very very softly and serenely, so much so that perhaps it is heard only within and not with the physical ear.

As readers, we are so accustomed to the "inner voice" as a narrative strategy that we are apt not to recognize what a marvelous innovation we have here. That familiar figure, "the angel of the Lord" has become here first "the word of the Lord" and then, more inwardly yet, this still small voice. The storyteller is struggling to represent the interior dynamics of consciousness, and furthermore to put a distinct theological spin upon those dynamics.

The thin small voice repeats the question that "the word of the Lord" had already asked: "What doest thou here, Elijah?" A mere redactive doublet, editors commonly advise, ignoring the dramatic power of the repetition. If I ask you a question once, and you answer it, and then I ask exactly the same question again, the clear dramatic implication is that the first answer was completely inadequate. You were not answering what I asked. Both times Elijah answers the same way: I am here because they are trying to kill me.

God's refusal of this answer, so to speak, points to deeper dimensions of Elijah's motives, dimensions that the narrative gestures toward around this matter of whether or not God is "in" the fire. Does Elijah--do we?--trust in God's real presence? Or was the fire on Mount Carmel something more like magic? Maybe it was just one of those fine prophetic tricks, stunts in which even the prophet himself does not entirely believe. Maybe what has brought Elijah to this cave are his own doubts in the real presence, in the manifest historical presence, of the Lord.

The classic economy of Hebrew narrative moves Elijah onward without answer: he is given further tasks to do, and off he goes to do

them, in despite of those who seek his life. Prominent among these tasks, of course, is the calling of Elisha who, in lovely dramatic closure, slays not one but twelve yoke of oxen--but boils them, and gives them "unto the people" to eat, the people who for so long had suffered under the famine in the land. But given that our hero is Elijah, and given that this happens on Mount Sinai, we cannot hurry on with him quite so abruptly.

It is the theological genius of the Jews variously and complexly to insist that God is both transcendent and immanent, both the eternal timeless creator who cannot be imaged in the form of any created thing, and yet also the immediate personal redeemer manifest within history and within individual memory. It is an insight Christians appropriate under the doctrine of the Trinity.

And these are the lines, the vertical and the horizontal, that we must cross to call down fire. In this regard, the tale of the greatest of all prophets both cautions and proclaims that the immanent God, the redemptive, personal, historical, immediate God, is manifest both within history and within the still small voices deep within consciousness. There is of course reason to worry when Ahab is hunting for us, when the currents of history seem to scour all hope and all meaning from the landscape; but that does not mean the Lord has forsaken us. In the furthest deepest cave where we seek shelter, there we may again hear that silent and serene little voice.

The doctrine of the Trinity solves the epistemological quandaries and projects of modernity. We are creatures, created things, made in the image of the Creator and yet also called to know, to love, and to serve. The world itself, from the least little ghost of a quark to the furthest marvels beamed down from the Hubble--all this is created as well. And thus there is no "problem of knowledge."

Knowing particular things remains tricky, even such plain and simple things as into what deep dark "safe place" the spare garage-door opener was laid. Even in greater matters than this, we are hemmed on all sides by ignorance, by arrogance, and by greed. Humility and wisdom both counsel sternly against absolutist claims to certainty, to objectivity, to finality. But both knowledge and truth are possible. We have metaphysical, transcendent warrant for that.

It is merely the case that we can never be sure whether or when they are within reach. For the Christian, humility takes the place of debilitating skepticism; and thereby generosity can displace the hermeneutics of suspicion.

The Trinity also redeems us from the quandaries of individualism. Identity is assured just as knowledge is assured--which of course (and alas!) does not short-cut anyone's spiritual journey of self-discovery. Just as the possibility of knowledge depends upon the possibility of

truth, so too the possibility of identity depends upon the validity of intuition--that still small voice and what the Anglo-American tradition (to the contempt of Continentals) calls "common sense," the wit to know where to look for the earth and the sun. Coleridge puts it well:

It is the table itself, which the man of common sense believes himself to see, not the phantom of a table, from which he may argumentatively deduce the reality of a table, which he does not see. If to destroy the reality of all, that we actually behold, be idealism, what can be more egregiously so, than the system of modern metaphysics, which banishes us to a land of shadows, surrounds us with apparitions, and distinguishes truth from illusion only by the majority of those who dream the same dream? . . . It is to the true and original realism, that I would direct the attention. This believes and requires neither more nor less, than [that] the object which it beholds or presents to itself, is the real and very object. In this sense, however much we may strive against it, we are all collectively born idealists, and therefore and only therefore are we at the same time realists.²

Coleridge's "true and original realism" has been held in high contempt as a simple-minded misunderstanding or a dishonest evasion of the core "problem" of modern philosophy. In fact, of course, it is neither. He was neither dumb nor dishonest: he was a Christian, and he supposed that God had a hand to play in assuring the coherence of consciousness, whether regarded objectively, as knowledge-of-the-world or subjectively, as self-awareness.

Coleridge's principal effort to articulate this understanding can be found in his various works concerned with the nature and operation of imagination. This effort culminated more or less mid-career for him, in 1817 with the publication of *Biographia Literaria*. After the *Biographia*, with the help of a physician to titrate the laudanum doses that controlled his congestive heart failure, Coleridge's work turns more and more centrally toward theology.

His theory of imagination derives in various and well-documented ways from both the Kantean analysis of consciousness and the "faculty" psychology of the eighteenth century. It has an equally-central origin, I contend, within the doctrine of the Trinity; and therein lies its usefulness for our times.

¹ "An Anatomie of the World: The first Anniversary" lines 205-215, in *Donne: Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 213-214.

² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), vol. I, p. 179.