

Sermon: On Mount Carmel  
Scripture: I Kings 19:11-13a  
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans  
Date: June 21, 2009

You might have noticed the banner out on the front lawn wishing Our Lady of Mount Carmel a happy 150<sup>th</sup> birthday for this is their big celebration weekend. Mount Carmel is a mountain in northern Israel along the Mediterranean Sea where Mary appeared in the 12<sup>th</sup> century to a Carmelite monk named Simon Stock. But Mount Carmel in Israel is first famous for another story and it is fitting that it's this story that our Old Testament scripture is focused upon today, the story of Elijah. But before I tell it, I have to admit that there are ways that the Old Testament characterizes God that I find difficult to resolve. I struggle with the Israelites claiming to be the chosen people – that God has chosen them above all others. And it's difficult for me to stomach the story of the Exodus when I read that after this oppressed group of people escaped from enslavement under the Egyptians, it is written that God ordains them to take the land of Canaan and completely decimate the native people there. I struggle with reading some of the Psalms that praise God and ask God to destroy or punish the enemy. Well, the Elijah story holds similar tension for me. I mean, it is fascinating and you just want to cheer for Elijah, but you can't help but feel disturbed about what happens to the followers of Baal.

So the story is set in the Northern Kingdom of ancient Israel. Remember under David and then Solomon Israel was a united kingdom, but soon after Solomon's reign Israel is divided into the Northern Kingdom still called Israel and the Southern Kingdom called Judah. The book of I Kings deals primarily with the history of the Northern Kingdom and it is there that Elijah shows up and he is a prophet of the Lord. Now prophets throughout the Old Testament are continually doing one primary thing – they are calling the people of Israel back to faithfulness to the one God away from the popular, more wide spread devotion to many gods. So you just know that trouble is coming when you are reading along in I Kings and hear that the new king of Israel, Ahab, marries a foreigner named Jezebel. The problem with Jezebel is that she is a serious devotee of Baal, the storm god, and she hosts over 450 prophets of Baal at her royal table. And not only that, but she ruthlessly persecutes the rival prophets of Yahweh.

So there comes a time in the midst of this when there is a severe draught and famine in the land. Elijah, the prophet of Yahweh has made it very clear that he is this is a direct result of Ahab's unfaithfulness to God. But Ahab just doesn't get it. When Elijah finally meets him face to face, Ahab says "You are the one that is causing all this trouble." Elijah says "you're kidding me right? This is your doing! You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed Baal like your father before you. You must choose. What is it going to be Baal or Yahweh? There's only one right answer." Ahab doesn't answer so Elijah challenges Ahab to bring the 450 prophets of Baal up to Mount Carmel for a little contest.

Ahab takes him up on the offer and the prophets are assembled on Mount Carmel as well as a large crowd; you know, the ones who are always up for a good competition, especially when it involves a backwoods prophet challenging the King of Israel. Two altars are piled high with wood and two bulls sacrificed and laid on top of each pile. The 450 prophets of Baal were to go first and were to call down fire to ignite the altar. So that morning the prophets surround their altar and begin calling on the name of Baal as Elijah looks on. By noon, the story goes, nothing had happened and so their shouts and cries to Baal give way to frantic dancing; in which Elijah took some pleasure and began taunting them saying "shout louder perhaps he's deep in thought or busy or traveling or something!" And they get more frantic, screaming and slashing themselves dancing around in lunacy. And then evening comes with still no response from Baal and they give it up, thoroughly exhausted and turn to Elijah as if to say "OK, your turn."

So Elijah casually walks over to his altar arranges some wood here and there and then says to the people there "Get me four large jugs of water and pour it over the pile." And they do it. Do it again, he says and they did it again. Do it one more time to represent the 12 tribes of Israel and they did it one more time, thoroughly soaking the wood and even filling the trench that had been dug around the altar. "Now" Elijah says stepping forward, "O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that you are turning their hearts back to you yet again." And with that a fire from heaven falls to the earth and ignites that pile so thoroughly that the water in the trench sizzles to steam in a flash. Everyone there on Mount Carmel sees this and says "The lord is God" and they lay themselves prostrate, "The lord is God"! And Elijah says to them "Now I want you to seize every last prophet of Baal and slaughter

them in the valley.” And they take the prophets and slaughter all 450. Elijah is victorious.

And so we read this story in our own scriptures at church on Sunday mornings and are suppose to feel what? Pride? Comfort? Inspiration? I don't know. Elijah strikes me as rather arrogant and blood-thirsty. When I read it I begin imagining that the writer of I Kings is coming from Israel's high court writing propaganda to further the claims to justify the exploits of a powerful nation!

But it's something quite to the contrary. I Kings, along with the whole of the Hebrew scriptures, was written by a devastated people. We have to keep in mind that the people who wrote this history, these sacred scriptures, were writing them from exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, far away from their homeland. They were not sitting in the lap of luxury in that land of milk and honey writing about their escape from Egypt and how great and favored they were by God. They were not being fanned by Phoenician slaves while they wrote about the victory of Elijah. They wrote these scriptures when they were homeless; a little struggling impoverished remnant of a once strong nation wondering, at times doubting, that they would even survive to see their homeland again and you know, those that wrote the scripture wouldn't. All they could do was write down the stories that had been told to them; all they could do was remember the stories of those who had come before them and in those stories bear witness to some half-baked sense of a larger purpose and plan that they once believed marked them as a people. That was their only hope – to listen for, in the stories of the past, the voice of God that came to them in their suffering present as a still small voice – not easy to distinguish but there nonetheless saying that God was still at work, that maybe something greater was being woven from even this present tragedy that was their lives.

Someone asked me a while ago after hearing a particular Psalm that I read which went something like “God will provide us with everything we need” how we could read that and accept that when there are those who simply don't get everything they need, when there are those who die of hunger or violence or neglect. They don't have everything they need. Only someone pretty comfortable can afford to claim that God gives us everything we need, right?

But what is more the case in the Psalms is that it's those who are without who can't afford NOT to claim that God will provide. The Psalms were written by people who

did not have everything they needed. These words are a prayer. These words are an expression of hope. These words are written by and really intended for those who are without. It can become problematic for those of us in the lap of luxury to claim the same thing. Etty Hillesum was a Dutch Jew who wrote these stunning entries in a journal during her time in a concentration camp during the Holocaust and they were first published posthumously in the 1980's. And it was she who attested to the Psalms as giving her the strength and even the joy she needed despite her horrific circumstances. "The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not be in want." If we say it with our mouths enough times we will come to believe it and know it in our hearts whether it makes logical sense or not. God will provide for us if not now, at least in the end, we believe that, we try to believe that.

And so the writer of I Kings wrote about a rather tragic history of the Hebrew people and even in a story as glorious and victorious as Elijah's, the doubt, the anguish, the misgivings of a defeated people dominates the story. Elijah doesn't walk away from Mount Carmel a hero, but he actually runs away a criminal. What happens after the contest is that Jezebel hears what Elijah has done to her prophets and says she is going to have his head. So Elijah turns tail and runs away into the desert; Elijah, this man who had just called down fire from heaven and defeated 450 prophets of Baal; turns tail and runs from Jezebel. When he gets far enough into the desert he stops and lies down under a solitary broom tree as the story goes. He's exhausted, he's worn out, he's despairing and depressed, so much so that he asks God to take his life; this man who had just been the recipient of cheers from thousands of adoring people. He says take my life Lord, for I am no better than my ancestors. It's the same old pattern, victory through violence and then the cycle of violence continues. Elijah's maybe feeling "This just isn't working for me. This is the pattern and practices of those who have come before me. This will just continue forever. I want out. What's it all for anyway?" And he falls asleep under the broom tree.

But an angel comes and taps him on the shoulder, tells him to wake up and take some food and drink. He needs strength for his journey. He still does not move at first but finally Elijah hears and stands up, heartened ever so slightly by the angel's presence. Strengthened by the food and drink, he then walks for forty days and nights until he comes to a cave; where he lies down to finally sleep again. But he is awakened by

another angel and asked to wait for the Lord. “Wait for the Lord, Elijah. He is about to pass by.” So Elijah, that faithful prophet of the Lord, stands up and looks toward the mouth of the cave and listens. A great violent wind howls and rips through the trees shattering rocks, but as it is written, the Lord was not in the wind. Then a great earthquake rocks the very earth beneath his feet, but the Lord was not there either. Then a great fire raged but still Elijah remained unmoved, for the Lord was not in the fire. Then all of the sudden there was a moment of quiet, a moment of deep silence, and in that silence, it is said, Elijah heard a still small voice. Elijah moved to the mouth of the cave and pulled his cloak across his face, for he now stood in the presence of God.

The culmination of the story is not in Elijah’s victory over the prophets of Baal but rather in Elijah standing there in all his self-doubt and suffering and recognizing that in a quiet, subtle moment, he was in the presence of God and therein lay his hope. It must have been something like what the writer of I Kings experienced as the story of his forefathers and mothers flowed from his pen. In the quiet of that lonely foreign room with the forming of those words he knew that he was in the presence of God and therein lay his hope. It must have been something like what Etty Hillesum experienced when she stared out her cell window in that concentration camp filled with so much fear and suffering and caught her breath at a small patch of blue sky. She says she felt she was standing in the presence of God and therein lay her hope.