

The God of the Old Testament
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The Second Sunday after Pentecost

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You probably won't be surprised to know that back in the day, when we still got on airplanes easily, I dreaded the moment when meeting the new person beside me, and they'd say "oh, what do you do for a living?" And when I tell them, they'd say one of two things; they'd say, "You know, I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious," or they would say, "You know, I like Jesus real well, but the God of the Old Testament, not so much."

We can unpack the first of these at some other point, but the second, I'd like to unpack that a little bit. Actually, today, this Sunday, and likely, for the next two Sundays in different ways. What we'll do is try and look at our first readings, and say, what do we learn of God there? What is this God?

Now first, let me say that we try very hard not to speak very much of the Old Testament these days. We tend to speak of the "Hebrew Bible" – that is, what we have called the Old Testament was written in Hebrew – or of the testament to Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Rachael, but the idea is not as if the first half of the Bible is something we want to discard, right?

It is, in fact, where we learn of the God of Jesus. Even in today's Gospel, the Legion of evil recognizes Jesus as the son of the most high God. And let's be really clear, that "most high God" of which Legion speaks, and the God that Jesus worships, is what I think people are talking about when they say that they "don't care much for the God of the Old Testament."

So, I wanted for us to look for a bit at the story of the first reading. It is not without problems. There are things there that can be stumbling blocks. But I think it's important to read these, as we read all of scripture, in the way that Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, describes as reading stories of faith in which again and again, individuals and groups of people wonder and keep on wondering at natural phenomenon, at historical events, at the two of these together, and asking of them questions of faith.

These are stories of people who ask again and ever again, how is it that God is here? Or what is it that we learn of God in these experiences? These are stories of faith and meaning. I would submit to you that most of the time, the problematic pieces for us are not the point of the story anyway.

This morning's story is set in a time of political chaos; at the decline of the nation of Israel, Ahab, who was king of Israel, had married Jezebel – a very astute political move. Jezebel was a Phoenician, and you've probably seen enough "Masterpiece Theater" or historical dramas to know that people marry to form alliances, and that's precisely what happened.

Ahab, king of Israel, had married Jezebel, a Phoenician, and then Ahab tolerated Jezebel's worship of her family's god, Baal, who, by the way, was a god of storm and weather. Set that aside for a minute, we'll think of it again.

This problem was blamed by biblical writers for the political unrest and chaos of their times. Things were going badly for their nation. Things were unraveling. (We know something of that, right?) And they looked around for why, and they said, “one reason – maybe *the* reason – is because our king is allowing his wife to worship Baal.”

Now, during this time, many Gods – Baal, for sure, and Yahweh, the God of Jesus – had these groups of prophets that served them and spoke for them. Sometimes gatherings of 400-600, we’re told. Now, according to these “sons of prophets,” as they’re sometimes called, both the prophets for Jesus’s God and the prophets of Baal, the will and purpose of God and the purposes of their king coincide perfectly. Does that sound familiar to anybody? The will of God, and the will or intention of their king, according to these prophets, are the same.

So, in those tellings, God is really nothing more than a way to bolster up the political power and agenda of the day. Now, in that context, Elijah arises. He arises as sort of a lonely prophet, called upon after the others have been there telling the king exactly what the king wanted to know, only not really solving the problems, like famine and drought and so on. After they had called all these other prophets, then the king in one place says, “Okay, have we heard from all of the prophets?”

And somebody says, “Mmmmm, sort of. There’s this one prophet over here who has a different idea.” So, they call Elijah.

Elijah then has contests – and some of them are fantastic contests – with the other prophets. But they are not so much the content of today’s reading or our concern here.

The other piece that we should say is that the narrative that we have read – all the stories of Elijah that we have – were written after 586 BCE. What’s very important about that is that 586 BCE is the time of the utter defeat and collapse of the nation of Israel, and the people are taken into Babylon, into exile.

This story is all written and told looking back, as God’s people have wondered, and they keep on wondering, “Why? What in the world happened? We were a proud nation, a strong nation, and it is all collapsed.”

The answer that the biblical writers give us is that all that collapse is because the people have chosen false gods.

I wonder, is it not the case that we, all of us, then and now, appeal to our God in chaotic times? And in those chaotic times, it is often easier to see when we or others are actually depending on false gods.

We very seldom name ours “Baal,” or anything like that.

I would submit that we name ours things like “self-sufficiency” and “independence.” We name our false gods “nationalism,” or “tribalism.” We name them the name of some ideology or framework that we are committed to. Sometimes, I think even our gods become our comfort and our ease, or our status quo, or economic systems.

False gods, I would submit – and I believe this is consistent with the biblical witness – that false gods are often, in fact, the cause of going awry. And they are often the cause of our individual or collective collapse.

So, in that larger framework, we have this story where Elijah, who is just coming from a showdown with Baal’s prophets – a showdown he had won, handily – Jezebel had put a price on his head. And so, Elijah, wise as a prophet, fled, first into the wilderness. And in despair, he sits under a tree in utter despair saying, “God, I give up. I have done everything I know to do, and it’s not enough. I am prepared to die. But please, don’t let Jezebel kill me. You, God, please, take my life.”

So, I want us to notice here, who is the God of the Hebrew bible, the God of Jesus, Abraham, and Sarah? He is a God who is a refuge in time of trouble, and ever-present help.

Elijah, under a tree by himself, having given up and in abject despair, is nourished and strengthened, is fed by God. He is fed by God, who then says, "Okay, get up, let's go." Given new purpose.

For forty days, Elijah takes a journey – you know, forty days, reoccurs, doesn't it? Forty days in the wilderness, that's happened before, and it's going to happen again – For forty days, a time that doesn't just go away like that, but that lasts a while, during that time, Elijah is nourished by God, given strength by God, given purpose by God, until Elijah arrives at Sinai.

You know Mount Sinai too, I bet. Moses has been there (speaking of forty days) – God had given commandments and made covenant there. God had made promises there.

Elijah is taken on a journey through wilderness to a place that reminds him and us, and every hearer who knew the stories of this faith, that God is faithful to God's promises. And more than anything else, perhaps, God is faithful to the promise to show up. God is there.

You've heard this story. There's an earthquake. There's a fire. And those are not the places that Elijah finds God. Remember Baal, the god of storms? We have extant images of the god Baal, who is depicted as a warrior going into battle, riding in and bringing a storm. Baal is a god who was believed to be a god who came in a storm of violence, who sent fire to destroy.

And I believe the biblical writers are saying is that the God that we have, you may expect to see coming in power and might and strength and all of the ways that we are accustomed to thinking of the biggest, baddest one on the face of the earth, right?

And instead, God comes in an unexpected way. In a kind of silence that is so intense, you can hear it. God shows up, just not in the same way that Elijah or others might have been looking for God.

Imagine that we were still surprised when God showed up in a manger, right? Once again, not in the way of prevailing kings and powers. And hasn't it been true for you – it's been true for me -- that God shows up at times when I just catch a glimpse out of the side of my eye because I am looking in a different direction sure that that's how God is going to work. And all the time God is over here and shows up.

That's the God. That's the God of the first testament of scriptures. It's the God that Jesus knew. It's the God that we know, too.

So, as the story goes on, and I hope you will take a look at it in more detail, Elijah is heard. God gives Elijah a companion and an heir, a hope for the time to come. This one who had just, forty-some days before, been laying under a tree ready to give it all up, now has experienced God's presence.

And the next thing we see is that God says "now, we're going to anoint the next king, and in an installment we will read in a couple of weeks, there will be another prophet who will take up your work after you've gone. There are others who will come who will pick up the faith that you pass along, who will also serve, who will ride on your shoulders."

This God who has been our help in ages past will also be our hope, for years to come.

Is it not true for us that in chaos and decline, in times of defeat and despair, we are called to a true God, who is a refuge, who is faithful to promises, who shows up, who provides nourishment and new purpose, companionship and hope, even if it's not the way we expect, even if it's not exactly the way we expected it? It comes.

This is the God of Sarah, of Abraham, of Rebecca, Leah, Isaac, and Jacob. It is the God of Jesus. It's the God of generations of people. It's the God of my grandmother, and my father, and, I trust, of those who come after us.

To this God, today and forever, be honor and glory and praise.

Amen.

1 Kings 19:1-15a

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." [Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."] He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have 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."

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces 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 sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have 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." Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus."

Galatians 3:23-29

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Luke 8:26-39

Jesus and his disciples arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a

house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me" -- for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.