

“A Prophetic Tradition”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
June 3, 2007
Scripture: 1 Kings 18:1-18

Let me say a few words as a means of introducing this story. As I mentioned during the children’s time, I had a college reunion this weekend. I saw a few of you there. I was curious why people go back to a school five, ten, twenty-five, sixty-five years later. So I asked a few people what is it that they hoped to find. Who did they want to see and what did they want to hear? For some, it was an opportunity to revisit the place where their unique identity was firmly shaped. For others, it was a chance to remember who we were and what we once were like and what we once dreamed. To remember how we thought our lives would unfold. To remember what it is about ourselves that we want to pass on to our children and grandchildren.

And that is a similar reason I picked this story from the Bible for today. It is a story from long ago, of a time that no longer exists, with people far removed from our lives and our ways of thinking. But I trust that we go back into our traditions to remember who we are. That in these old stories, we can best remember who we want to be and get back in touch with our dream. And so I invite you to go back with me to remember the stories, the legends of the prophet Elijah. If you’re here again in June, we will visit a few other stories about Elijah. This one stands as a prelude. Let us first begin with a prayer.

Every once in a while, someone is so much larger than life that we keep waiting for their return. Sometimes it is metaphorical – as conservatives look for the next Ronald Reagan in the field of presidential candidates. Sometimes it is existential – waiting for Godot. Sometimes it is scientific. Ted Williams, the last baseball player to bat .400 in a season, was frozen and placed in a cryogenic vault waiting for future scientific advances that will allow his return to the plate to feast on weak pitching. And some wait for Elijah.

With this story, we get an introduction to the prophet Elijah, one of the great personalities in the Hebrew Scriptures. Elijah’s earthly life does not so much come to an end as it gets suspended. The way the legend goes, he doesn’t die a normal death, but in the presence of eyewitnesses, gets taken up into heaven (2 Kings 2:9-12). As the Hebrew Scriptures come to a close, the prophet Elijah stands ready and waiting, poised to leap dramatically and prophetically into the future.

Later, in the gospels, Elijah reappears in the stories of Jesus. “Who do people say that I am?” Jesus asked his disciples. And they responded, “some say Elijah.” (Matt 15:14, Mark 8:28, John 1:21-25). In the story of the Transfiguration, when Jesus goes up on the mountain with two disciples, who appears in a dazzling light but Moses and Elijah (Matt 17:3, Mark 9:4-5, Luke 9:30-33). And as he is dying on the cross, those standing by hear Jesus cry out, and think

he is appealing to Elijah (Matt 27:47-49, Mark 15:35-36). To this day, among Jews, a chair is left open at Passover, in anticipation of the return of Elijah.

In the theological history that is First and Second Kings, the story of Elijah is more than a historical possibility, but as Walter Brueggemann puts it, a “device for futuring.”¹ So, today, to better imagine your future and my future and our future, the story of Elijah beckons us back in time in order to look forward. Back to the ninth century BCE, to the time of King Ahab. Ahab’s reign lasted almost twenty years, and his government was known as strong and stable with a robust military. But Ahab had a nemesis, a pest, a constant critic - Elijah.

Three years earlier than our story today, the prophet Elijah had gone so far as to declare a drought. “Because you Ahab, have been worshipping Baal not a drop of rain or dew shall fall unless it is by my word.” (paraphrase of 1 Kings 17:1) And wouldn’t you know it, a severe drought set in. And since then, Elijah has been on the lam, hiding from Ahab. Food is delivered by ravens, sent by God. (If you have seen crows picking at roadkill, you might imagine that Elijah’s meals, while life-sustaining, were not up to Central’s quality!) In an interesting twist, Elijah, so concerned to protect the worship of Yahweh, finds protection at the home of a non-Jew, the widow of Zeraphath.

Which brings us up to today. The drought is about to end, Yahweh tells Elijah. And Elijah is to go and inform the king. Meanwhile, back at the palace, King Ahab summons his top aide, Obadiah. Unaware that the drought is about to end, the king, at his wits end, decides to go searching for water, any water, and any grass that might keep the royal herds alive. So he sends Obadiah in one direction, while he goes the other way.

Now Obadiah is an interesting figure. The narrator tells us that Obadiah greatly revered Yahweh (18:3). And one does not become the top aide to the king without some expertise in the language of kissing up to whoever has power. Obadiah meets the prophet and quickly greets him with extreme politeness and deference. “Is it you, my Lord Elijah?” Over and over Obadiah warns Elijah that he is wanted dead or alive. “You don’t want to go back to Ahab, he will kill you!” And if that news wouldn’t deter Elijah, Obadiah said that the king would have Obadiah himself killed for just serving as the messenger!

A contrast is quickly established. Obadiah, with a conflict of loyalties, calling both Elijah the prophet and King Ahab “my Lord.” The frantic repetition. The eager desire to please. On the other hand, Elijah with his steady insistence that he is to be seen by the king.² One skilled in political glad-handing, able and eager to please, to say whatever is necessary to earn a vote of confidence. The other, confident only in God and in what is about to be said. And when the king and Elijah finally meet, Ahab asks, “is it you, you troubler of Israel?”

And here, at the beginning of Elijah’s exploits, we find ourselves at one of the wellsprings of our tradition. In the contest that follows with King Ahab, Elijah points to a different ruler, with an alternative kingdom. We, who make our way into the church, who turn the pages of an ancient story seeking to find wisdom for today, find ourselves as heirs to a prophetic tradition.

“Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” Ahab asks Elijah. You see, the kings of this world have grown so used to being surrounded by Obadiahs, so used to having yes-men and yes-women carry out their every wish, so used to unquestioned power, that they imagine themselves to be a god. No one to judge their actions and desires. No one above them. Anyone who offers criticism will face their wrath. Anyone who dissents is labeled treasonous. “Is it you, Elijah, you troubler of Israel?” This label had probably worked before for Ahab. After all, who wants to be viewed as a troubler of the country one loves? Only a certain personality type enjoys being a constant critic. Ahab had always been able to turn the tables by using this quick label. Is it you, you troubler of Israel? Not me, most would respond. I’m sure, King Ahab, you know what is best for the country – so sorry to have disagreed with you. What can I do for you? You know, that sort of response.

But it would not work this time. Is it you, Elijah, you troubler of Israel? This time, the prophet will not back down. “I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father’s house, because you have forsaken the commandments of Yahweh and followed the Baals.” (1 Kings 18:18)

It is important to remind us of this prophetic tradition. For it is so much easier to go along with the crowd, to obey the king, to laugh with the bully. It takes guts to stand up to those in power and say that they are wrong. It takes courage to speak out in favor of an unpopular position.

You can love someone or something, as Elijah loved Israel, and still find yourself standing alone, having to say no. In a letter to his young son, the novelist Tim O’Brien said “I yearn to witness your first act of moral courage. To hear you say “no” for the first time.³ I have a deep hope for children growing up in this congregation, that they will remember stories such as today’s and be able to say no when it most matters.

Being prophetic is not just about saying no. It is also about matching words with actions. Living out your deepest hopes. Saying yes with all your heart.

We try to live this out this prophetic tradition as a church. Through Sandy White and other volunteers at Martha’s Closet, we offer clothing and hope to women searching for jobs and dignity and a way to provide for their family. At our Wednesday community lunches rich and poor, educated and uneducated, sit together at round tables. We teach our children that differences in skin color and schools and family types are to be celebrated, not shamed. We spend a little bit more to have Fair Trade coffee after worship and use Fair Trade palm branches.

This story reminds us that we stand as heirs to Elijah’s prophetic tradition. We stand in a long line of prophets who were not afraid to speak truth to power, who were not afraid to call royal lies into question, who called Israel back to better and truer ways. Elijah, the “troubler of Israel.” Moses, who stood up to Pharaoh and said, “let my people go.” Amos, who said to the political and religious leaders, “I hate, I despise your festivals . . . but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 6:21, 24). Micah who urged listeners to “beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks” (Micah 4:3). John the Baptist, who said, “prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” And Jesus,

who ate with outcasts, who touched and healed the sick, who threw the moneychangers out of the temple. Who threw great banquets for the poor. Who helped imagine a different kingdom, and a different kind of king. The one who said that the Scriptures would be fulfilled as “People will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God.”

Today we seek strength at that table. Amen.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) 65.

² Richard Nelson points out this contrast, and highlights the behavior of Obadiah in his commentary in the Interpretation series. First and Second Kings (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1987) 115.

³ Tim O'Brien, “A Letter To My Son,” read at Macalester College, 2 June 2007.