

# *After the Wind and Fire*

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1 Kings 19:1-15a

Galatians 3:23-9

## I.

Have you heard the sound of sheer silence?

The prophet stood at the entrance of the cave. The years had been long and hard, and recent days had been most terrible. Elijah and the other prophets had opposed the heads of their government, with the results that often occur when people oppose bad governments—oh and let's keep the ugly story accurate: Elijah had also taken the sword to the priests of the rival local religion...provoking the great anger of the royal house. And now, right or wrong, Elijah was alone. All his allies were gone, killed, eliminated because they had opposed the injustice and corruption, of Ahab and Jezebel.

Finally, all alone, worn down and numbed from confrontation, Elijah had fled to the wilderness. He lay down to die, in a place with no food or water! He fell asleep. Yet when he awoke, there was cake and there was water.

When God wouldn't let him die, Elijah travelled on for forty more days, sustained by the memory of cake and water. He moved on, till he came to a cave on Mount Horeb, the Mountain of God. And there at last, in the cave, he spent the night.

In the morning, God questioned Elijah. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah replied: "[T]he 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."

I've got nowhere left to go, God, but this cave. I have no one left to turn to, I am alone. My community, the prophetic community, is no more. My people have abandoned all I hold sacred. Where else shall I go? I am done going. Here I am. This is as far as I can go. I have come to the last stop.

Something told him, that voice told him, to go outside. Still, stubborn in his grief and solitude, he stayed in the cave. And a wind came up, a wind so great it blew rocks off the face of the mountain. Elijah could hear it howling out there, out on the mountain. But God wasn't in the wind. And then the mountain began to shake. But God was not in the earthquake. And when the quake had stopped, there came a fire. Even in the cave, he could tell what was happening out there-- smell the smoke, feel something of the heat, catch a reflection of the flames. God had come to Moses in a fire! But God was not in the fire.

And then, when the fire had gone, there came over that place a sound-- what the old translation of the bible called a "still, small voice." What Elijah heard was the sound of sheer silence.

Elijah knew. Elijah knew that the One who is beyond all words and sound was there. In the silence.

He knew that Truth had found him. Oh, maybe he'd been looking for some great voice from outside. But it was in the utter silence of the cave, after all the noise from outside had ceased, Elijah finally realized he had been tracked down. So, when he had no choice any more, the prophet stood at the entrance of the cave. His face hidden in his mantle, he stood there. And Someone spoke to him.

## II.

Have you been to that cave? Oh, no-- I don't mean the one on that particular mountain. I just mean that place of solitude, that cave of despair where the prophets end up who have lost their community, lost their hope, lost their people?

The God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ-- yes the God of Mohammed as well! This God seems to have been abandoned, in our day. A lot of for profit religious leaders with large mansions and friends in high places have redefined God, and empowered the politicians in pushing hate for Gay people, fear of the foreigner-- putting down women, justifying racism. Truth has been twisted into something unrecognizable. The God of private and public Justice has been twisted to be a God of purely private solace and public anger. The God of compassion and mercy and reconciliation has been scribbled over with the little gods of greed and self-advancement. The God whom the apostle Paul knew so well, a God in whose presence male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile were no more-- this God is being replaced in the hearts of our people by worship of a god who defends white privilege. There is being advanced a false deity who encourages hatred, who uses mistrust between groups to build power—And gain elections. This false god is as narrow as its followers-- and as cruel and unforgiving in judgment.

There was a time in this nation, two generations ago, when the church of Jesus Christ heard the voice of a different God, with a voice which sounded like thunder, which caused the conscience of this nation to quake. Great preachers spoke to us from the mountaintop, great movements were led by big people. They cast out a thousand demons of oppression and loosed the chains of generations of discrimination. And the people responded.

But then something happened. Over the years we grew discouraged. The people slipped away. The great prophets, thundering voices, were cut off by assassins' bullets. Or they grew tired, or retired. Or in some cases, they were bought off.

And in the churches, the few who were left took refuge in the cave of personal spirituality. We took refuge in the cave of our own wounds. We took refuge in the cave of despair. We took refuge in the cave where the prophets go, when the prophetic community seems to be no more....

This is where the Church in North America is today. Not every little congregation. But much of the church. We know well this cave of fear and defeat.

Perhaps we are waiting for the big voice of God, again, to stir us out of our lethargy, our fear, our despair, our comfortable place of rest beneath the rock. Send us a big wind, God. We will listen to the voice in the wind. Send us the rumble of a quake-like movement, God. We will respond to your voice if the shouts are loud enough and the crowds swell! Send us fire, God, a burning bush, or at least burning speeches to stir us up...

And yet while segregation gets a fresh start in schools, while from the pulpits in cavernous cathedrals we hear overwhelmingly the sound of sheer silence—or at least only small voices lacking conviction. For there is no one left to make the voice big for us anymore. Where have the great leaders gone? Where is the big voice now?

But listen. Listen to the silence. God is here. In the cave where we thought we were out of reach. Listen. Listen to the sheer slicing purity of silence. You and I are standing at the entrance of the cave... On one side is a big bleeding world, desperately in need of some vision, some hope, some restoration of community. And on the other side there is only emptiness. But God can find us, even hesitating in the tunnel just inside the cave. There is a voice even in the sheerest silence. You see the thing about this God, this ancient God of justice and love, is that this God does not require the big voice, the wind the quaking pews. For in even in the sound of silence the voice can speak.

### III.

God sent Elijah back. I don't suspect Elijah was really surprised. He'd been dealing with this God for a while now. He understood the persistence of this God. Elijah knew that God wasn't necessarily done with the people, just because the people thought they were done with God.

That was an awfully long time ago. Nonetheless, God is sending the prophetic church community back, hauling us out of our cave and sending us marching back on the road to faithfulness. God is calling us to speak with the same vigor, the same persistent courage, to address the same places of power in our society with a message potentially just as unpopular as Elijah's message so long ago.

What is the message which is to be delivered to this society of ours? Part it is captured succinctly in our reading today from the book of Galatians. “[Y]ou are *all* heirs of God through faith.” Elijah wrapped his face in a mantle when he went to the entrance of his cave. As we rise to go to the entrance of ours, the mantle we need to wrap around us is the freedom and dignity to which *all* of humankind is called, *all* named as heirs of a divine promise. It is a message about our essential common humanity—and our essential human rights, over against all the big voices calling for higher walls and more bullets.

And where are we going to go, what are we to say when we leave the cave? There is no shortage of work to be done.

Over the weekend I went to the UCC meeting for New York State, in Rochester New York. I was privileged to listen to an American prophet, The Reverend Doctor William Barber II, a preacher in a church in Goldsboro North Carolina, and president of the NAACP. Undeterred by the regressive politics of those who have seized control of the North Carolina legislature and Governor's Office, Dr. Barber has brought together a remarkable coalition, Black and White and Latino, gay and straight. Out of the silence of much of the church across our land, Dr. Barber is speaking clearly and with conviction: "Labor rights are not a left or right issue. Women's rights are not left or right; education is not left or right; helping people when they are unemployed is not left or right. These issues are the moral center of who we claim to be as a people. "

God is still here, and the voice rings out. God is calling us, whispering to the churches, saying, "Come on, all of you, wrap yourselves in the mantle of Christ, come to the entrance of your cave, come out on the mountainside and see the vista of human need, human longing, human suffering laid out before you. Come to the entrance of the cave, and behold the path I have set before you, as you prepare to resume your march to the land of promise.... "

God is calling us back: back to a new day of community and a new day of truthfulness, a new commitment to the Christianity that claims the vision of a new creation, in which justice finally reigns, and compassion overrules cynicism and violence. This is not our dream. It is not just our hope. It is our commitment-- the reality to which we dedicate our lives.