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God's Prophets – Elijah & Elisha
IV. Under the Broom Tree
I Kings 19:1-18

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The great philosopher Immanuel Kant said that there are only three questions worth asking: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? I think Kant was on to something there. In fact, I think those three questions will serve us well as we seek to make sense of Elijah's flight into the wilderness – especially since it follows what can only be described as an extraordinary victory just the day before over the prophets of Baal. What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? In seeing how God answers these questions for Elijah, I think we will find answers for ourselves – for our own days and nights under the broom tree.

As our story opens, as we said, Elijah has just won a great victory over the false god Baal and the prophets of Baal – well, properly speaking, God won the victory, but Elijah was the one on the ground representing God.¹ More than that, God has now lifted the drought in Israel, because Ahab and the people have turned back to him in the wake of that triumph.² Everything seems to be going in the right direction for Elijah, and for the cause of God Elijah has been so passionately proclaiming.

But, as our story opens, everything quickly seems to start going in the wrong direction. King Ahab returns to the palace and tells Queen Jezebel all that has transpired – and Jezebel is not impressed. Not even a little bit. In fact, what she is, is convinced that Elijah needs to be done away with once and for all. And since her pathetic king of a husband has been failing to pull this off for three years now, and since he now temporarily seems to be in league with Elijah, she will take matters into her own hands and get it done right – and soon. So, straightway, she sends a threatening message to Elijah: *“So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of those prophets of Baal you slaughtered, and do so by this time tomorrow!”* Elijah receives the message. And immediately Elijah runs away. Why?

Many Bible translations say that Elijah ran away because he was frightened by Jezebel's threat – but that doesn't really make sense, given what we have just witnessed. Elijah himself had just seen the fire of God coming down from heaven and consuming the bull on Mt. Carmel. Elijah had just participated in the slaughter of 450 prophets of Baal. And all of this he had done in the near presence of King Ahab, the very one who had been trying to kill him for three years. So, Elijah just does not strike me as a yellow-bellied coward of a prophet – and, even if he were, he had just had proof that the power of God was on his side. Why would he fear Jezebel if he had not been afraid of Ahab and of the 450 prophets of Baal? And he had to know that God could just send down fire and vaporize Jezebel if He saw fit! At the very least, he had to know that God

could have protected him from Jezebel, just as He had earlier protected him from Ahab. So, it just doesn't make sense that Elijah was frightened by this threat and that's why he ran away.

And I don't think he was. I think the problem here lies with that one word in the original Hebrew describing Elijah's response. Without going into all the particularities and peculiarities of Biblical Hebrew, some ancient manuscripts use the word we translate as "fear". While other, even older manuscripts use the word "to see". The two words are very similarly spelled in the Hebrew. And Biblical scholars, again for a lot of reasons we don't need to go into, are increasingly coming round to the belief that "see" is the correct word in verse three, and not "fear".³ So, read this way, Elijah doesn't run away because he is afraid of Jezebel and her threat. He runs away because, in receiving her threat, he sees something about the situation he is facing. Not that Elijah was afraid of Jezebel's threat, but that Jezebel's threat made him see how things really were – and it was because of what he saw that he ran away.

Which brings us to Kant's three questions and how they can help us make sense of what is going on here. What does Elijah now know? In other words, what is it exactly he has seen in Jezebel's threat? What he has seen, what he now knows, is that with Jezebel still on the throne, getting rid of Baal worship in Israel is not going to be as quick and easy as he had thought. He had thought, in fact, that the battle was already won on Mt. Carmel – the people had turned back to the Lord, Baal worship banished. But with Jezebel still in power, and even Ahab cowering before her, Baal worship was clearly not going anywhere. And Elijah, therefore, believes he has failed in his prophetic work. That's what Elijah sees in her threat; that's what he now knows about the situation he is facing.

So, given what Elijah now knows about this situation, his situation – that his work as a prophet of God has thus far failed, and that Baal worship continues in Israel – what ought he to do? He decides the only reasonable option is to run away. To give up the fight. To get away from Jezebel and her threat – not so much because he is afraid of her (again, one bolt of lightning from God and Jezebel is toast!). But because he sees that Israel under Jezebel still belongs to Baal. Despair, depression, disillusionment – but not so much fear. In fact, we get the slightest sense that Elijah is even disappointed in God for not doing more to win the full and complete victory over Baal back when He had the chance on Mt. Carmel. And so, Elijah does what he thinks he must do, the only option he thinks he possesses – he just gives up and he runs away.

And then, our third question: what may Elijah hope? And he answers that question for us: *"But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.'"* Given what he knows, he does what he does because he has no hope of anything getting better anytime soon.

So, there we find him this morning, sitting under that broom tree in the middle of nowhere, full of despair and hoping only to die. But we quickly get two clues that no matter how much he wishes it to be, Elijah's story is not over just yet. First, an angel appears, bringing him food and drink to sustain him. And the second time this happens, the angel tells Elijah that his journey into the wilderness is not yet done. He's still got forty day and nights of journeying ahead in order to get where he really needs to be – which is Mt. Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai – the place where

God met with Moses to give him the Ten Commandments, the place where Israel had truly become God's covenant people, the place where Israel had once before lapsed into idolatry, dancing around a golden calf. Elijah's story is not yet over – he is on his way to the holy mountain of God. Look at the cover of your bulletin insert – Jonene found that great illustration for us. That's an actual broom tree in the middle of the wilderness. But look also at the mountains in the distance, representing both Mt. Carmel from whence Elijah has come, as well as Mt. Horeb to which God is now leading him. Elijah may be done with life, done with being a prophet, done with Israel, perhaps even done with God. But God is not yet done with His servant Elijah.

Elijah arrives at Mt. Horeb and shuts himself up in a cave. God speaks to him anyway: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Which sounds to me less like an accusation and more like an invitation – God saying to Elijah, in effect, tell me what is wrong, what is on your mind, what you are thinking and feeling? Which is an invitation God is constantly issuing to us all in inviting us to pray. Elijah makes his speech about Israel having forsaken God, and how he is a failure as a prophet, and how they're trying to kill him, and so on. And God, instead of answering Elijah's complaint, item by item, instead tells Elijah to go to the mouth of the cave and wait. Elijah doesn't do it – he just stays in the back of his cave. But suddenly, a great wind tears at the mountain and at the mouth of that cave – rocks and stones being smashed into pieces. Elijah stays in the cave. Then a great earthquake trembles the whole mountain beneath Elijah's feet. Elijah stays in the cave. Then fire, flashing through the sky like on Mt. Carmel, fire consuming the trees and grass in an instant. Elijah stays in the cave.

And then, after the wind, the earthquake, and the fire, a still small voice, the sound of a whisper, a quiet so deep and dense that it could only be the presence of the Lord – the voice of the Lord God. Elijah hears that silence, that whisper, that still small voice – and he comes out of the cave at last, covering his face before the presence of the Lord. He understands that he is now on holy ground. God again asks him why he is there, what is wrong. And Elijah repeats his complaint. And again, God does not answer Elijah's complaint, item by item. God does something very different. He reveals to Elijah something Elijah does not know – that there are still seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed to Baal. And He tells Elijah to go do something Elijah had not thought to do: to anoint Hazael to be king over Syria, to anoint Jehu to be king over Israel, and to anoint Elisha to be his own aide and eventual successor as God's prophet in Israel.

And suddenly, God has given Elijah a new hope: that Jezebel will not have the final word. That God will indeed destroy the idolatry of Baal worship among His people. And that Elijah's work has not, and will not be, in vain – but is still yet and most certainly to bear fruit before the Lord.

Our three questions again – what can I know, what ought I to do, and what may I hope. What Elijah thought he knew was that all was lost. God reveals to him a new bit of knowledge – that all is not lost, that God is still at work in Israel; and that, in the end, the Lord wins. Elijah thought the only thing he could do was to run away, curl up and die. God reveals to him that there is another plan for Elijah's life, another work for him to do – to prepare the way for that future final victory over Baal God is even now working to bring forth. God has work still for Elijah to do. Elijah had no hope left in him. God reveals to him that it is his despair which he needs to give up on – that his hope was never to be found in his own efforts and outlook, but rather is to be

found, is anchored in, the certainty that God is working His purpose out, even when circumstances make it seem as though it can't possibly be so. That God is working His purpose out – and, in the end, God's will shall be done on earth, as it is in heaven. That the will and power and work of God in this world guarantee that there is indeed a new world coming, a new day just about to dawn.

And so, with that new knowledge, creating in him a new hope, Elijah gets up, heads out, and gets busy doing what he ought to be doing in serving His God. Those three questions have now been answered for Elijah in a new way: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? These three questions have now been answered for Elijah in God's way. By way, not of his own circumstances and limited field of vision, but by way of God's Holy Word.

So, then, what does any of this have to do with us here this morning? Well, have you ever found yourself sitting under a broom tree in the middle of nowhere, feeling like all is lost, nothing you can do to make it better, without hope for tomorrow, and wishing you were dead? Okay, maybe you wouldn't put it in exactly those terms – but we've all been there at some time, in circumstances at least something a bit like that. Sitting with Elijah under a broom tree. When all we knew was despair or hurt or fear or helplessness. And where all we could think to do was nothing, or at least not enough. And when we were, therefore, teetering on the brink of surrender, of losing hope altogether – of losing any belief that somehow tomorrow would turn out okay, that tomorrow might just possibly come out even better than okay.

We've all been there, with Elijah under the broom tree. When was the last time you were there – I'll give you a second to think about it. Or are you there right now? I confess I've been feeling under the broom tree myself for a little while now – along with every other pastor I talk to. We have worked so hard to keep our churches going during Covid, thought we were finally on the brink of better days ahead, finally the return of that great elusive thing called “normal” – when along comes Delta dashing our hopes and raining on our parade. Every pastor I know right now, at least in private conversation, sounds a whole lot like Elijah. And you can fill in the blanks for your own under the broom tree experience during these seemingly endless Covid days we are going through – or for any other days and reasons and seasons, for that matter. We've all been there.

But here's what Elijah's story teaches us for our own under the broom tree days. That what we think we know even about our own circumstances is never the full story. Because what we can't always see, but by God's Word can truly come to know, is that God is still at work in our lives, still at work in whatever situation or circumstance has got us under the broom tree – still at work to bring all things round to good before all is said and done. And that, therefore, second, there is something for us to do rather than simply give up and give in to despair. We are to keep on praying, keep on worshipping, keeping on reading His Word, keep on doing those two most ordinary and yet extraordinary things God calls His people to do, in bad times as well as in good – to keep on loving God and to keep on loving our neighbor as best as we can, even under the broom tree.

And so, third, to remember, to rediscover, to lay hold of anew that hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. That unfailing hope which is based in His great promises to us that He will be with us always, even under the broom tree. That He will indeed bring all things round to good in the

end, even when we cannot yet see how. And that, in the end, always and forever, God's love really is going to win – in us, through our circumstances, and on earth as it is in heaven. Under the broom tree, this is what we can know, this is what we ought to do, and this is the hope we may have – today and tomorrow and forever.

¹ I Kings 18:17-40.

² I Kings 18:41-46.

³ A good summary of this debate can be found in Dale Ralph Davis, I Kings (Christian Focus Publications, 2016), pp. 253-270.