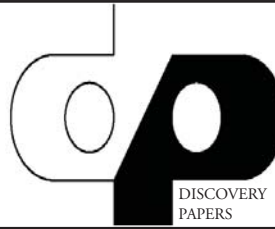


IT AIN'T GONNA RAIN NO MORE

SERIES: FIRE FROM HEAVEN



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As a young Christian, I was taught that God responds to our prayers of petition in one of three ways: “Yes,” “No,” or “Wait.” “Wait” is God’s most challenging response to our cries. Often when we wait for him to act, it feels as if he has receded off into the distance and is not listening to us. We may wonder if we’ve done something wrong. “Why isn’t God answering my cry? Is there some failure in me?”

In fact, we will mature when God feels farthest away, when he utters no command, offers no explanation, takes no action that we can discern. In these times we benefit most from the biblical accounts of faith and rescue.

For almost three thousand years one figure above others has been associated with the dramatic, world-changing intervention of God: the prophet Elijah. In this message we’re beginning a series of studies that focus on Elijah and on his disciple Elisha.

Perhaps you are aware of the practice of setting an empty chair for Elijah. At the Jewish ritual of circumcision, which occurs on the eighth day of a baby boy’s life, family members and guests stand in a circle holding their beautiful child, with a specially trained rabbi officiating. But there is also an empty chair made ready in case Elijah should come. It’s an expression of hope that this child will live in a world that has been set right, a world where the rule of God is unrivaled.

The annual Jewish celebration of Passover also has an empty chair. A table is set, a meal is prepared, and the events of the Passover, symbolized by the elements of the meal, are recounted. Regardless of how many guests have been invited, one extra chair is placed at the table for Elijah. The front door is left unlocked, and at some point in the evening, it will be observed, “Maybe this year Elijah will come to our meal and if Elijah comes, then next year we’ll dine together in Jerusalem.” If Elijah came, it would mean that God was setting everything right.

The empty chair reminds us of the things we long for that haven’t happened yet. Perhaps these studies of Elijah’s story will help us realize that God is at work in ways that

we haven’t been aware of.

Elijah is prominent not only in the traditions of Judaism, but also in the beginnings of the Christian story, the gospels. The hopes generated by the stories of Elijah were tremendously influential in the days of Jesus’ public ministry.

The first event in New Testament history was the visit of the angel Gabriel to Zacharias, to tell him he would have a son, “who will go as a forerunner before him [Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17). He would come to be known as John the Baptist. John’s life and message shook his people awake.

Jesus said that if you had eyes to see, you would encounter Elijah in the ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 11:14-15). The Lord himself was rumored by some to be Elijah during his time on earth (Matthew 16:13-14; Mark 8:27-28; Luke 9:18-19).

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus was made glorious before three of his disciples. There were two witnesses who stood beside him: Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet (Matthew 17:1-5; Mark 9:2-7; Luke 9:28-35).

Some observers at the cross heard the Lord’s cry of deepest agony as an appeal to Elijah to come for him (Matthew 27:46-47; Mark 15:34-35).

So we would do well to go back to the stories about Elijah and learn from them. These accounts are not very long. Elijah wrote no book; in fact, he speaks very little in these stories. His speeches are short and powerful and usually without instruction intended for settings beyond his own. But Elijah is surely someone whose love and commitment to the living God changed everything.

As we read this prophet's story, let's read it as those who are waiting for God to change all of history, and change our own history. Elijah's testimony can strengthen us when the temptation to despair seems the strongest, when the darkness is deep and God seems far away.

1 Kings 16:29-17:1:

²⁹Now Ahab the son of Omri became king over Israel in the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. ³⁰Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him.

³¹It came about, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went to serve Baal and worshiped him. ³²So he erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal which he built in Samaria. ³³Ahab also made the Asherah. Thus Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him. ³⁴In his days Hiel the Bethelite built Jericho; he laid its foundations with the loss of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates with the loss of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the LORD, which He spoke by Joshua the son of Nun.

¹Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."

The reign of darkness

These events took place in a region that has been much in the news recently, southern Lebanon and northern Israel. In modern times there are cities named Haifa, Tyre, and Beirut in this region. In our texts we'll hear the names Sidon, Samaria, and Zarephath, but it's the same small area. It was the location of important history then as it is now.

The events of Elijah's time took place almost three thousand years ago, in the late 900s B.C., about fifty years after David and Solomon's kingdom had been divided

into the northern kingdom named Israel and the southern kingdom named Judah. In those days Israel was a regional power. Omri, the father of Ahab, had been a very successful politician and military man. He had secured Israel's borders and made effective alliances. The Israelites were prospering. Omri and all those around him were godless and arrogant, but they were good at running their world.

Ahab took godlessness and arrogance to a whole different level. "He did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him . . . He did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him." He was a rebellious, violent, unjust, and cruel man and Jezebel, his wife, was much worse.

We read references in this chapter to the Canaanite deities Baal and Asherah. The religion of the ancient Canaanites was terrible everywhere we encounter it, but the worst version was found in Sidon. Even Sidon's idolatrous neighbors were disgusted by its practices. It is very difficult to overstate how twisted and bloody the religion of the Baal of Sidon was—a dark combination of degradation, violence, and ecstatic debauchery.

Jezebel was a daughter of that religion, and Ahab married her. He embraced her beliefs, imported them to Israel, and began a concerted effort to replace worship of Yahweh with shrines to Baal and Asherah.

Jezebel and Ahab were both wicked and successful. Championing Baal was, by all accounts, leading to prosperity among the people. The men and women who loved God were increasingly disregarded and mistreated. Those who refused to honor Baal were isolated from one another (Elijah complained at one point that he alone had faith [1 Kings 19:10, 14]). Prophets had been killed and those remaining hid in caves. It seemed as if the light would be extinguished, leaving only darkness.

When God is silent

I mentioned at the beginning that it's hard for us to wait on God, without an explanation, when we have called out to him for help. "Lord, why don't you defend your own Name? Why don't you fight for yourself? Why don't you stop the wicked people from doing the worst things? Why don't you help those who love you?" It's a time when those who care for truth seem to be speaking to a God who has stopped listening, can't respond, or won't.

Wickedness boasts and Baal worshipers twist everything that is beautiful.

You may have had circumstances in your own life that feel like that, when the enemy's voice grows louder: "Where is your failed God now? Maybe he has forgotten or abandoned you."

In our time it seems as if the bull market in terrorism is expanding, and those who stand for peace, wisdom, or goodwill are shunted from the stage, unheard. We wonder, where is God in this? We live in a time when children are threatened by moral chaos and church members callously abandon their marriage vows. Wars and genocide destroy the innocent. Many of us in this congregation have dear friends who have in this last year walked with loved ones through cancer and untimely death. I know families, as you do, who have had many nights when one or all of the members of the family were crying, "Lord, it seems as if you're not listening. We're waiting, hoping, weeping . . ."

But now we meet Elijah, and Elijah's story renews our hope that God will answer his children. The waiting will not go on forever. Evil will not triumph in the end. God will bring about justice. He is going to intervene. My hope is that as we read these stories of Elijah, we'll be reminded that though it may seem dark to us, the darkness does not last forever.

"I stand before the LORD"

Let's look again at 1 Kings 17:1:

"Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.'"

Picture this scene. Ahab is presumably in the throne room of his palace, surrounded by evidence of his power. He is the son of a king and a king himself. Elijah is alone. A man of the wilderness, he looks as if he has just gotten back from a long backpacking trip. His appearance is completely at odds with this royal environment.

Elijah's aloneness is a recurring theme. We read that he is from Gilead, which was on the far side of nowhere; and

Tishbe, his hometown, was so small that there is no record of its location. Moreover, his parents are not mentioned. Most of the time when someone is introduced in Scripture, the pattern is to announce who his or her forebears are, but we don't know anything about Elijah's parents. We don't know if he has siblings, a wife, or children.

In this manner he appears before Ahab with brush in his beard and unkempt hair. He sticks his finger out and says, "It's not going to rain until I say so."

What identifier is Elijah given here, if not a family or a recognizable place? "I stand in the presence of the LORD." Elijah is identified as someone who worships God, listens to God, wrestles with God, and waits before God. The book of James in the New Testament picks up this phrase, "I stand in the presence of the LORD," and puts it this way: "He prayed earnestly . . ." (James 5:17-18). He prayed from the heart, regularly and often. And with only that as his calling card, he is given a command to speak a word, and the command given to Elijah becomes God's word for the world.

What we know, given the rest of the story, is that Elijah is announcing the beginning of the end of Ahab, Jezebel, the house of Omri, and everything they stand for—their Baals, their Asherah, their violence, and their degradation. On this day when Elijah announces a drought, he is sounding the death knell for their whole program. It doesn't happen quickly; there are a lot of chapters still to be written. Starting this day, Ahab's life is forfeit, violently and with dishonor; Jezebel's life is forfeit, violently and with dishonor; their heirs will all die and their house will end. Prayers calling for justice will be answered.

Elijah and Ahab confront one another and behind each of them is a deity: the God of the Bible on the one hand, and the Baal of Sidon on the other. Do you know what Baal's role in the world was? To bring rain. Baal is depicted in all the literature of that time as the storm rider, with lightning bolts in his hand, the god who brings the rain so the crops will grow. But the servant of the Lord God says it won't rain. Baal is a fraud. He can't deliver. He's irrelevant. It won't rain until the servant of the Lord God says it will rain, and only then.

The darkness that has enveloped the land, the injustice that has gone on too long, is now called to a halt. One person with nothing but his worship of God to define him has drawn a line in the sand and said, "The exaltation of

Baal is finished.”

These stories are an important reminder that when we cry out for justice, when we're burdened by pain and sorrow, the promise of God to us is that someday every tear will be wiped from our eyes, that our brokenness is not the final chapter. The hope we have that love is greater than death is hope that God has given us, and he will reward it. We may have to wait, but we wait knowing that the empty chair assigned for Elijah is someday going to be filled not just by the prophet, but by the arrival of God himself. God has already come to us in the Incarnation, he has paid for our sins on the cross, he has raised us to life in the resurrection, he has empowered us by the presence of his Spirit. He has not forgotten us, and he will not.

Take a moment and think of perhaps one thing that has been hard for you, in which you've waited, wished, and cried out, but the answer hasn't come to pass yet. Remember it as we study 1 and 2 Kings. By the close of our series on the intervening God of Elijah, see if the thing that seems impossible doesn't look different to you.