

Elijah and Elisha are the “Batman and Robin” of First and Second Kings. Wherever they go, the drama is thick, the circumstances larger than life, and the handling of them by our superhero, Elijah, is worthy of several issues of DC Comics.

These books, along with First and Second Samuel, make up a fascinating account of the lives of Saul, David, Solomon, and the lesser kings of the north and south. But whenever Elijah hits the scene, you almost feel like he should be accompanied by his own theme song.

One particular king, Ahab, married Jezebel, a follower of Ba'al and a powerful force herself. That a protector of the faith of Israel would marry outside of his religion was one of many signs of bad leadership. At this time, they were also living in a time of great drought, which Elijah addressed.

On Mt. Carmel, Elijah challenged the priests of Ba'al to show whose God was stronger through the sacrifice of a bull. The four hundred and fifty priests of Ba'al cut their bull into pieces, laid it on the wood and called on Ba'al to take the offering with fire from morning until mid-afternoon. When they failed, Elijah carved up his bull, laid it in the wood, and made an altar of stone around it, in an echo of a previous act by Moses. Showboating for the crowds so they would understand how powerful his God was, Elijah had water poured over the offering four times, and only then did he call on God, who responded by sending down fire to consume the burnt offering. Elijah then had the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba'al killed, and pointed out to King Ahab that the rains were beginning to fall to stop the drought that was devastating the kingdom.

The prophet is the one with the power, not the king. The prophet is the one who listens to God. The prophet is the one who inspires.

While at Mt. Carmel in Israel, our group saw the area where it was written that this event took place. It inspired such fervor in one of the pastors traveling with his group that he stood up when our guide had finished, and began preaching to all of us about the power of God being so great that it was here that God's enemies perished in their disbelief. Immediately following that speech, we were ushered into the chapel at Mt. Carmel, where our groups sang hymns wanly, and members of our IUCC group got up and walked out, wondering what they had gotten themselves in for. It was in that particular exodus, that I spoke with our tour guide about how we were going to have to operate in order to travel together.

Because, the pastor simply had it wrong. God does not invite prophets, kings, or anyone for that matter to murder in God's name. While the Bible is full of such accounts, each reflects a worldview of a certain age—one filled with poetry over science, of larger than life figures who command our attention for a reason; so that we can see how their lives are reflected in their understanding of the connection they have to the creative force. Those are the characters we remember. Others lose their names to a dusty paragraph here and there.

And, a great irony present at Mt. Carmel today, is that the place where a contest took place that stated, “My religion is better than your religion,” is now a spiritual home to the Baha'i faith, which incorporates many faiths through its pluralistic understanding of religion. The shrine and gardens there are considered “the eighth wonder of the world,” but we were not afforded the opportunity to see them.

For centuries, people have given biblical names to their children. I was “Paul” for a reason. Elizabeth is the mother of John, and Anne is the mother of Mary. “Elijah's” abound, and Joseph

and Mary are among the commonest of names. But name me more than one “Ahab.” Melville chose the name of the king known for his bad leadership and turning away from God, for the captain of the Pequod who still beckoned his men to follow him after his death; pinned by ropes to his great white whale.

Elijah is a name from the scriptures that we are meant to remember. At a Seder meal, an empty seat is left for his return. Other names from the Bible have lived in every generation. True, few parents name their kids Melchizedek or Moab, but you can be sure your tiny-tot will never have a play-date with a little girl named “Jezebel.” Nor will you get an e-mail from young parents that reads, “We’re taking little Ahab to Sea World. Hope he doesn’t get any ideas J LOL.” Some names are not meant to live on except in infamy.

Elijah has his ear inclined to the Holy, his eyes are set on what is ahead, and he follows. He is clearly regarded as a great prophet—Elijah is even likened to Moses on several occasions. Here, he strikes the water and parts the Jordan. Instead of a burning bush, there is a fiery chariot. At one point, he is even positioned in the cleft at Mt. Sinai where Moses met God. Where the Gospels mention the Transfiguration, it is with Moses and Elijah that Jesus is lifted up.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” He responded, “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.”

The scene reads like a first son asking his father for his inheritance—the first one expected to receive the double share. In this instance, Elijah tells him that it is not his to answer, but to look for a sign—in this case the fiery chariot that would take Elijah up into the skies, leaving Elisha with his mantle, with which he parts the water and knows that the person to whom he has allied himself most closely has indeed, left him a double share of his spirit.

Elisha then, and other Elisha’s today, whether so named or not, look to an example of spiritual living in order to find what it was about the life lived that brought their mentor into such a connection to a holy place within.

I wonder if we are not on a similar quest as Elisha—seeking out the people and the places that seem genuine and real, and wanting to absorb the spirit therein; even a double-spirit if possible.

Some people follow religion as if it was all about their personal salvation—pointed inward and answerable by lists of rules, creeds or literalistic readings. This expression, once having attained a near-dominance in our culture, is both slowly shrinking and shrill in that realization. Someone once said that, “The church is like a swimming pool—most of the noise comes from the shallow end.” (Sarah Coakley, Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity, Harvard Divinity School)

Others soak up whatever they can from those around them whom they deem to be great examples of good living. These are the saints we can relate to—the every day people who lived with great yet simple wisdom—people from whom we would like to inherit a double share of their spirit.

Who are the people who taught you—and passed on the mantle that you wear today; because it did not come entirely from your own making? Were they teachers, relatives, friends, people who accepted you when others did not? How were you shaped into the understanding that you hold today not of any comfortable place that you occupy in this world, but rather in the places that make you chafe to make things better than they are? How are you, like Elisha to Elijah, their disciple and student, carry-er on and on-going prophet?

The German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote reflectively about the Sermon on the Mount in a book that is required reading of every seminarian, called *The Cost of*

Discipleship. Accepting the consequences of our decisions, he argues, will naturally fall to us when we make the decision to become followers of Jesus.

Bonhoeffer's own life is a good example—his decision to stand up to the Nazi's by his involvement in a plot to kill Hitler led to his own death—the “cost of discipleship for him was paid in his hanging in a prison courtyard by the Nazis on April 9, 1945.

While discipleship might force some people to decide between life or death, few of us will be asked to pay that ultimate price. But we will be expected to live in a certain way.

The readings for today demonstrate some of that cost of discipleship.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul provides us with some direction for living out our discipleship. He exhorts the early Christians: “Stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery,” and “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Elijah and Elisha were directed to put discipleship above even the most cherished values of their cultures; discipleship directs us to do the same. There certainly are values or social customs that tend to yoke us in a kind of slavery. Political and social pressures, for example, can corrupt an understanding of what love of country means and lead to disdain for others further down the economic chain; advertising mostly perpetuates avaricious consumerism and self-indulgence. And who has not at times felt enslaved by technology? How should a disciple act in such situations?

Paul's second directive needs no interpretation. Love does not mean “never having to say you're sorry,” just to evoke the title of a weepy, horrible movie from the 1970's. It means that we stop “biting and devouring one another.” It means that we begin to make peace in our families, at our workplaces, in our country and in our world. It means that we live lives that “are guided by the Spirit.”

The question from these readings today is, at least for me, from whom do we wish to inherit a double share of their spirit? Who are the people at church, at work, and certainly in our home-life, that inspire, enliven, and enrich us? Do we tell them enough what they mean to us—do they even know? Having learned some lessons along the road from them, how will you pass those on? Elijah left in a fiery chariot—about as dramatic an exit as our superhero can make. But he left his mantle for Elisha to carry. Your mantle may already be around your shoulders. Paul warns us not to bite and devour each other in bad behavior. But he also says that through love we should become slaves to one another, and quotes from Deuteronomy, “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Some of us are looking for examples of that kind of living so that we can hope to inherit a double-share. And perhaps those same “some of us” are also wearing the mantle that causes us to remember to live for others as if we already have.

Happy Summer—Amen!

Sermon Resource:

Section on Paul: *The Cost of Discipleship* Diane Bergamot, sermon. June 21, 2004