

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | AUGUST 9, 2020

1 KINGS 19:9-18 | PSALM 85:8-13 | ROMANS 10:5-15 | MATTHEW 14:22-33

Sixty years ago, John Updike wrote a famous story entitled “Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu.”¹ It tells the story of Ted Williams’s final game at Fenway Park. It’s the last week of the season and all the Red Sox have left is a series on River Avenue in the Bronx. It’s 1960 and, as a player, Williams is a shadow of his former self. But the stadium is full of devotees looking for some glimpse of the old magic. And sure enough, Williams hits a home run to center field in his final at bat.

This could be an uplifting, Greatness Never Dies Just Do It story. Except for the ending. While Updike is driving home, the radio broadcaster announces that Williams won’t travel with the team to New York. He’s done. The story you think will be all about greatness ends up being a story about endings. Ironically enough, the thing that makes Williams great is that he knows when to, as Updike puts it, do “the hardest thing. Quit.”²

Today’s reading from 1 Kings is a similar story. It’s really beautiful and really powerful and really kind of sad. (Sort of like Updike’s eulogy for Williams.) And it’s also one that, if you just hear it once and then rush on to something else, it’s hard to fully appreciate. So I’m going to do something I try super hard not to do, which is summarize what you just heard.

The prophet Elijah has been commissioned by God to show the unworthiness of the Canaanite god Baal. In the Hebrew Bible, Baal is the primary rival of Yahweh. When Yahweh says that you shouldn’t worship other gods, the implication usually that Baal would be your next best option. Baal promised good harvests and abundant descendants while Yahweh promised manna that didn’t taste very good and very long walks through the wilderness. So you could see why Baal would have some appeal.

In Chapter 18, right before today’s reading begins, Elijah challenges the priests of Baal to a God-off where they each summon their God to do impressive tasks. Baal fails, Yahweh wins, and Elijah kills four hundred of their priests. But every action has an equal and opposite reaction. When Queen Jezebel hears about the slaughter, she says that Elijah will be dead by the next day. And so Elijah, quite understandably, runs away. Running away is both the smart thing to do, but it also means that Elijah is abandoning his prophetic call. And that’s where today’s reading begins.

God encounters Elijah on the run and asks, “What are you doing here?” And Elijah doesn’t answer the question. He says, “I have been very zealous for the LORD... the Israelites have forsaken your covenant... [and] I alone am left.” So imagine Elijah’s emotional state here. He’s tired. He’s afraid. He’s burned out. But notice something else, too. He doesn’t see any options for God’s mission besides himself. After all, *I alone am left*. It’s almost like he thinks he’s irreplaceable. If you read the rest of 1 Kings, you know that’s not true. There actually are other Israelites who are devoted to Yahweh and could take Elijah’s place. But Elijah has told a story where he is the limit on God’s action.

God, as you can imagine, knows this isn’t true. And so God tries to connect with Elijah. God brings about all these events where God would usually show up. A wind so strong it can blow a

¹ John Updike, “Hub Fan Bids Kid Adieu,” *The New Yorker*, October 22, 1960.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1960/10/22/hub-fans-bid-kid-adieu>

² The other piece of subtext here is that sports fans usually believe that athletes have a supreme confidence in their ability. Williams’s decline was, in a sense, something that was known and spoken of among fans, but not something the athlete who always had another comeback ready could acknowledge. When Williams quits before going to New York, it means that he acknowledges that he knows what the fans do: he’s human.

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mountain apart. An earthquake that shakes the foundations of the world. A fire like the one that led the Israelites through the promised land. Those are the kind of theophanies Elijah loves. They would show up the false prophets of Baal in a heartbeat. But God isn't in any of those. Instead, God chooses to appear in a still small voice. The sound of silence.

And after all that, God comes back and asks Elijah the same question. "What are you doing here?" And, here's the important part, Elijah gives the same answer. Elijah has just had a radically new encounter with God much like Moses had on that same mountain. Those encounters fundamentally changed Moses's understanding of himself. But Elijah? He gives the same answer. I have been zealous. The Israelites have forsaken your covenant. I alone am left.

And so look what God does in verse sixteen. "You shall anoint Elisha... as prophet in your place." Essentially, God revokes Elijah's call as a prophet. God says that Elijah's done. He's going to pass the mantle to someone else. Elijah thinks that there is no one else like him, but God says, "Actually, Elisha can carry on in your place."

The important question for us is why God chooses to replace Elijah. He's not done because he ran away. He's not done because he killed all of Jezebel's priests. No, Elijah can no longer continue his prophetic ministry because he can no longer be changed by God. And if you're not able to be changed by God, if you're not open to transformation, if you're not open to being wrong, following God's call is going to be very difficult.

Our culture often values consistency more than accuracy. If someone's opinions or beliefs don't change, we consider them trustworthy. Consistency is seen not just as good but as a sign of virtue and character. Ironically, we should be more willing to trust people who change their minds. It means they're evaluating evidence and operating off the best information we have. But usually when someone changes their mind, we deride them as flip-flopers and see it as a sign that they're duplicitous. As Stephen Colbert once put it, *The heroes believe the same thing on Wednesday as they do on Monday no matter what happened on Tuesday.*

This happens in civic life and education and science and the arts all the time. And we do it with faith, too. Occasionally, I'll be at funeral or memorial services for someone, and during the eulogy someone will say, "So and so lived through a lot, but their faith never changed." This is intended as a compliment, but it's really damning with praise. Because it's just saying that nothing could change their beliefs. Not a changing world, not other people, not even God. Like Elijah, they would hear God in a still small voice and say, *That's nice. But God doesn't show up in still small voices.*

We might look at Elijah here and find him sort of sad and almost pitiful. But the bigger question is why God chooses to end Elijah's mission. Elijah's been doing well, why not just keep him out in the field? He'll probably be able to do some amount of good. After all, he just won the big contest with the Baal priests yesterday.

But to understand why, we have to think a little bit about idolatry. The Baal worshippers that Elijah has been competing with are engaging in a kind of textbook idolatry. You make a statue and say this statue is God and then when the statue doesn't give you what you want, you just make a different statue.

But idolatry isn't just about statues. Idolatry happens whenever we confuse God with our projections of what we want God to be like. Elijah's attempts to weed out idolatry have actually led him into another kind of idolatry. Instead of believing in God, he believes in his understanding of God. And that messes up all his priorities. Only when you severely misunderstand God can you say things like, "I alone am left." Once our beliefs become this rigid, once our stories about God become stories about us, we start to dismiss anything that doesn't look like what we're expecting. No surprise we end up replacing God with our own beliefs. We look for God in the earthquake, and we miss God in the still small voice.

And if you're a prophet, that's going to be a real problem. Because if you're called to be a prophet, if you're called to bring the word of God to God's people, you have to understand that you are not in charge. You're just following God.

And there's probably some grace in that. It means we can see other people as partners and not as threats. It means we don't have to close ourselves off from the world. And it means we can love God more than we do our ideas about God. We are not the limit of God's action. Which means can stop building idols out of stone, our beliefs, and our own egos, and start listening for that still small voice.

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