Sermon on 1 Kings 19:1-18
*From Coercion to Persuasion: How God Brings Us Back To Our Right Minds*

Our first reading from the Hebrew Bible has played an outsized role in the history of the Tradition. It is one of the biblical stories that has been used time and time again by those seeking to understand the who or what of God, if I can put it that way, how God relates to us and how it is humans can change over time.

Elijah’s been involved in a horrific act of violence; he’s killed the 450 prophets of Baal personally or organized it.

Before we judge him for this; we need to remind ourselves that his was a savage time; a time when Israel was fighting for her existence; King Ahab had introduced the worship of the Canaanite god Baal via his non-Israelite wife Jezebel her, and his agenda—though he does at least appear conflicted by this—is to remove the worship of the Lord from Israel and assimilate to Canaanite culture and religion.

Elijah organizes what he believes will be the climactic contest between Baal and the Lord. As you know, or if you don’t, read 1 Kings 18 after the service, the testimony of the text is that the prophets of Baal use every spiritual trick in the book to try and get their god to rain fire on their sacrificial offering

Elijah is able to make it happen with a simple prayer; he then orders the mop up operation, the killing of the prophets and not only the battle, but the war to save Israel’s future is won!

Except it isn’t. Elijah has made several critical mistakes: he’s misunderstood the bigger picture; he’s fought the wrong battle; and he’s used the wrong weapon.

As it turns out, Elijah is about to learn huge lessons, lessons relevant to us if we are to faithfully live from and into the Spirit’s presence, as we seek to be open to the many things that Christ has yet to say to us and to the Church.

At least that’s how I see it. This is complicated by the fact that we’re not to imagine that just because the story is in the Bible that the characters got it right or that even when the narrator pronounces that they got it right that they did!

Elijah has made the crucial error of imagining that just because God has been with him, just because he received a clear answer to prayer, that Baal was defeated; that he could now dismiss his enemy’s lives as worthless; that anger could be used to sweep away Israel’s problems.

Anger it turns out doesn’t change people; Jezebel will not change just because someone is threatening her; trying to coerce her to change. Apply that to any leader and any person and you’re on the cusp of a life-changing insight that has huge personal, communal and political implications.

As we’ve learned the sword of anger cuts both ways; yes Elijah has eliminated his prophetic competition but he himself has suffered the inevitable Post Traumatic Stress that comes from either experiencing or inflicting violence or abuse.

This partly explains how it is that Elijah flees at the threat of Jezebel. This prophet who has stood up to all previous, we might even say, more acute threats, now breaks and runs. Instead of a balanced assessment of the situation, Post-Traumatic Stress is a physical and psychological imbalance tending toward isolation, to despair and suicidal thoughts.

He wrongly believes that he is the only one standing up for truth, which leads quiet naturally to his isolation and indeed his despair.

There’s a narcissism to reactive anger and violence that leaves us alone. In my pastoral experience I can say that people who try to fix their problems through controlling, reactive anger are depressed and in despair.

When I’m in a depressed space I find it a good question to ask, “what am I trying to control? Who am I trying to control?”

But the good news is that God is not finished with Elijah, God is not finished with us! A process is about to unfold which is, in contrast to Elijah’s coercive anger, the revelation of God’s persuasive patient truthful love.

After the realization comes that his anger, his violence hasn’t solved anything Elijah asks for death, “it is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.”

Self-pity goes along with controlling behaviour, I’ve found, in myself and others.

In the midst of his narcissistic despair, God, via a messenger provides him with sustenance; it’s a beautiful little sign that despite his catastrophizing (another symptom of controlling anger by the way) that there’s care in the world and he’s the recipient of it!

Perspective begins to change when we allow ourselves to be helped by others. Another subtle but hugely important change of perspective; now he’s not just fleeing, now he’s on pilgrimage to Mount Horeb, the Mount of God, the mountain of God’s awesome displays of power and the giving of the Law.

One can sense why Elijah would be attracted to such a place; he likes the cut of it’s jib; he fancies himself a prophet of power why not go to the place of power!

On the mount things get even stranger, it’s hard to convey the strangeness in the limited time we have but suffice to say a battle for Elijah’s soul is taking place; in my mind it has all the appearances of an inner dialogue:

The Word of the Lord comes to him not as a prophetic pronouncement but as a personal question, “what are you doing here, Elijah?”

Elijah does what we all might be tempted to do when a question cuts deep, he recites a rationalization for his actions, framing his actions as “zealousness for the Lord.”

The voice then, without accusation or judgement simply says, “Go and stand before the Lord.” The construction of the sentence is ambiguous; is the voice separate from the Lord, the Lord or suggestive of the Lord working through some awakening awareness in Elijah.

Amazingly, astoundingly, here on this mountain of awesome displays, the displays happen all over again and God is not in any of them! It’s so discombobulating that we’re left to wonder if God wasn’t in the fire on the mountain, was God in the fire that consumed the altar!

Where is God, who is God? The Lord is not in the wind, in the earthquake, in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. Of course you can’t have a “sound” of silence, so some translate it as “a bare whisper” others “a thin silence” as a way of pointing out that this is a type of silence that reveals divinity.

And then again, the same question, “What are doing here Elijah?” Amazingly, but I find it heartening actually, Elijah throws out the same justifications but this time he’s only mouthing the words, he’s finally ready to let go and begin to understand what’s next for him.

Elijah is ready to move from isolation to the openness of solitude; solitude is creative thinking space that helps us be non-reactive, in that space Elijah is able to hear more clearly

It is in solitude that Elijah is willing to move from his need for noise to deep silence, to recognize that silence is God’s sign of persuasive love; the space necessary for humans to enter a thoughtful, prayerful dialogue with Divinity

Silence is different from quiet. Quiet can be enforced against our will; we might have something to say but we’re told “be quiet.” Silence is chosen, it is the confidence that God is working underneath and with human processes.

From this solitude and silence, Elijah hears that he is to go back and seek not to overturn, not insist on his own way but to appoint and anoint others through whom the work will continue.

Though it will never be complete we are enabled to partner with God’s Kingdom in faith from a stance of persuasion when we work within the system and recognize that there are others, there are always others doing the same!

It may not have the sexy definition of a “decisive event” but the regular give and take of communal politics, the regular exchanges of dialogue and the practices of solitude and silence before engagement are the way God works with us and in us!

Before he had the seminal insights that led to the ground-breaking insights of Galatians that we read today, many scholars think Paul spent time in Arabia at this very mountain.

When Jesus frees the man from Legion, from violence and abuse he frees the man to reenter the ordinariness of life, to be, not isolated and abandoned anymore but a citizen, able to take part in the regular events and exchanges that make life fulfilling and purposeful.

To each the question comes, “Allen, what are you doing here?” between my justifications and defensive posturing is the space, the thin space, the silence of persuasion.