

Labor Day Meditation: Elijah's Cave

I Kings 19

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In 874 B.C. Ahab became king in Israel. He took for his queen the Sidonian princess Jezebel. (When vocalized in Hebrew, the name Jezebel means “no dung” — Queen Take No Dung.) Jezebel enticed Ahab into worshipping Baal and his consort Asherah.

Baal was the fertility God who rode the storms hurling fiery lightning bolts and bringing rain, rain which fertilized the earth by impregnating Asherah, the Earth Mother who bore fruit.

To Jezebel, Baal and Asherah were earth, wind, and fire . . . not the *band*, but the fundamental elements of creation: earth, wind, fire, and rain . . . matter. Baal worshippers were materialists—Hedonists. The worship of Baal involved cultic prostitution and human sacrifice, and you can be sure it was all infected with demons—elemental spirits—spirits of the earth.

Well, Elijah prophesied to Ahab that the Lord would stop the rain. In the third year of the drought Elijah challenges Ahab to summon the prophets of Baal and Asherah and assemble them on Mt. Carmel. Elijah summons the people of Israel saying,

“I am the only one of the LORD’s prophets left, [Queen Take No Dung had killed the others] but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire — he is God” (I Kings 18:22-24).

Well, on that day of judgment the prophets of Baal call on their god. They shout and dance from morning until noon. At high noon on the mountain of judgment Elijah begins to taunt them. He yells, “Maybe your god is busy! Maybe he’s sitting on his toilet! He’s probably asleep, and you had better wake him.” So they shout louder and they cut themselves. They continue their frantic ravings until evening, and nothing happens.

Then Elijah puts his sacrifice on the wood. The people water it down. Elijah calls on the name of the Lord God, and the fire of the Lord descends upon Mt. Carmel devouring sacrifice, wood, and water, scorching the rocks and soil. The people cry out, “Yahweh is God!” and together they slaughter the prophets of Baal. The sky grows black with rain.

Elijah is filled with the power of God, such that he runs the seventeen miles to Jezreel before the king’s chariot, undoubtedly thinking, “It’s done! Ahab and Israel have faith now in the true God who answers with fire.”

What if we had faith like Elijah’s? Fire power like Elijah’s? Faith in the God of earth, wind, fire, and rain? (We could have used that this last year . . .) We *should* have faith like Elijah’s.

I witnessed God's power over the elemental spirits this past year, even over Satan himself.

- This past year I witnessed a dear friend miraculously healed of HIV.
- This past year we had visions in our worship . . . people saw the Great Eagle of Revelation 12, the rider on the white horse, and Jesus Himself washing feet.
- This past year we brought water to the thirsty, food to the hungry; we preached the Gospel around the world.
- This past year we built this building, and our body grew.
- It's Labor Day weekend, and this past year we labored, and God inhabited our labor.

I Kings 18:46 . . .

Then the hand of the LORD came upon Elijah; and he girded up his loins and ran ahead of Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel. And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, also how he had executed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time."

And when he saw that, he arose and ran for his life, and went to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, "It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!"

Can you imagine? After *all that*, Elijah runs for his life and prays, "Take my life." He curls up under a broom tree and wants to die. Can you imagine?

I can. In fact, that's why I decided to preach on this passage. I didn't know what I was going to say . . . just that I could relate to Elijah curled up under the broom tree.

Elijah prayed, "Enough." Elijah was overwhelmed. Yes, he'd seen God's incredible power, yet he had also seen the evil one, human sacrifices, demonic oppression, starving children.

Sometimes I'm overwhelmed by the depths of pain in this world and the sheer depravity of evil. God *always wins*, but the labor is overwhelming.

Elijah said he "wanted to die" (return to dust). I don't think he was so much afraid or anxious as he was tired. His labor was exhausting. And Elijah said he was "alone."

It's a lonely labor standing in front of all those people charged with speaking the Word of God. You can have the best friends in the world, yet your labor can be lonely.

It's Labor Day weekend. Last year was an amazing, wonderful labor. And looking at the opportunities of this coming year, I think I should be shouting like Elijah on Mt. Carmel! But in the last few weeks, I've felt like Elijah under the broom tree: overwhelmed, tired, and lonely.

Great friends, great staff, great wife . . .
But alone in my labor, delivering the Word of God.

Please . . . you don't need to feel sorry for me . . . because I've already felt sorry for myself. I think maybe some of you ought to feel sorry for *yourself*. Let me put it another way: You ought to have compassion on yourself.

Some of you are feeling far more overwhelmed, tired, and lonely than I am. You've fought harder battles than I have, in ministry, at home, in your family, at work. In all those places we are to deliver the Word. Maybe you know in your head God is Lord of earth, wind, fire, and rain, but you feel overwhelmed, tired, and lonely in your heart.

Elijah curled up under the broom tree feeling sorry for himself. But somebody else was feeling sorry for him too. Verse 5 . . .

Then as he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly [somebody] touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat." Then he looked, and there by his head was a cake baked on coals, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the LORD came back the second time, and touched him, and said, "Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you."

I love that. He *knows*. He doesn't say, "You can do it!" but "Elijah, it is too great for you."

So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God. And there he went into a cave, and spent the night in that place; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

The Word of God asks him, "Why'd you come here, Elijah?" Well, I would suppose he went to get more fire power. I mean, if Mt. Carmel wouldn't do the trick, surely Mt. Horeb (that is, Mt. Sinai) would! This was where it all started . . . glory days . . . the buckle of the Bible Belt.

When we're overwhelmed, tired, and lonely it's tempting to look for fire power in the past . . . back to the early church . . . back to the 1950's (*Leave it to Beaver*) . . . back to the "other side of the highway."

But the Word says, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Looking for fire power, I'd suppose. Talk about earth, wind, and fire! This was the mountain where Moses met with God. There were earthquakes and so much wind and fire that if anybody even touched the mountain, they'd die.

If Mt. Carmel wouldn't do it, Mt. Horeb would. But it's like the Word asks Him, "Are you looking for more tricks with earth, wind, and fire?" That sounds almost like Jesus . . . "Why do you seek after signs? An evil and adulterous generation seeks after signs."

One of Aram's professors in England suggested Elijah was there because Elijah was an American. He said, "So much faith in America consists of weekend to weekend power encounters." (Stupid Brits . . . what do *they* know?)

We *do* go looking for signs, and we go looking for proofs in earth, wind and fire, that is, in the fundamental elements of creation. We are so materialistic. Evangelicals and scientists are so much alike. We want proof or signs in matter. We want to see a leg grow at a healing service! We want some chemist to discover God in a lab somewhere, as if that will give folks faith, and then Ahab will believe.

"Why are you here, Elijah?"

Now, I love our Christian heritage, and I believe science is truly worship, and my leg *did* grow at a healing service — I *felt* it. But sometimes I still find myself curled up under a broom tree. And sometimes (this is really weird) I watch me, I watch us, I watch Christian TV especially, and it kind of reminds me of the priests of Baal running around Mt. Carmel frantically raving and cutting themselves, trying to get their miracle of earth, wind, and fire (the elements)!

"Elijah, what are you doing here?"

He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

"I've been fighting for you, God! *Zealous!* Trying to save your tail!"

[The Word] said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

"A sound of sheer silence." That's the New Revised Standard Version. It can be translated "silent thunder." The NIV has "gentle whisper"; the NAS has "sound of gentle blowing." "Still small voice" is the King James. But if it's a voice, it doesn't seem to say anything in the cave. And Elijah's not trying to discern the voice of God. He probably thinks he's been hearing it way too much!

Well, the Hebrew is very enigmatic here. All we really know is that it's *not* earth, wind, or fire. It's *not* an element or elements. It's *not* a created thing, but the presence of a No Thing; in

Biblical parlance: The Holy. All we really know is that God wasn't in earth, wind, or fire; but in the absence of all creation, somehow He *is*.

“I AM, I AM, I AM” . . .
and everything is in Him.

There is a story about three monks. One decided to preach the Gospel, one decided to care for the sick, and one decided to meditate in the desert in a cave. The first one became overwhelmed with his task and went to visit the second one, who had grown tired with everyone's needs. Together they visited the third one, who they figured would be lonely in his cave.

But he was neither exhausted, tired, nor lonely. They shared their struggle; he was silent; then he poured some water in a vase. “Just look at the water,” he said. It was murky, hard to see, just a cloud. They sat in silence a while, and the third monk said, “See how it has cleared?”

Perhaps all creation (earth, wind, and fire) is like the particles suspended in that troubled water. We have trouble seeing God, but when we are still, we *see* . . . or better yet, we *know*.

Psalm 46: “The mountains shake . . . the waters roar and foam [overwhelming!] . . . the earth melts . . . he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, he burns the chariots with fire! ‘Be still, and know that I am God.’”

Paul said to the Athenians, “In him we live and move and have our being.” Emily in the play Our Town signs her address:

Grover's Corners
New Hampshire
United States of America
Western Hemisphere
Planet Earth
Solar System
The Universe
Mind of God

Even chemists and physicists are saying that at the deepest level matter is dependent on person—spirit. And astronomers say, “All that is, sprang out of nothing . . . no thing, no time, no space; no earth, wind, and fire.” Maybe the thin silence wasn't a nothing as much as all earth, wind, and fire was nothing. And the sheer silence was everything.

Julian of Norwich writes:

In this blessed revelation God showed me three nothings. Of these nothings this was the first I was shown, and all men and women who wish to lead the contemplative life need to have knowledge of it: they should choose to set at nothing everything that is made so as to have the love of God who is unmade. . . . God wishes to be known, and is pleased

that we should rest in him; for all that is below him does nothing to satisfy us. And this is why, until all that is made seems as nothing, no soul can be at rest.

Maybe bone-tired, sitting exhausted in the silence, Elijah at last heard his own breath. I don't mean *air*. In Genesis 2 God makes man out of dust—created matter—elements. But then He bends down and breathes into the dust the breath—uncreated breath—of I AM, and man becomes a living soul.

You are a soul longing for rest.

You are a breath yearning for the lungs that bore you, the lungs of I AM.

You look for miracles in earth, wind, and fire, and the greatest miracle is *you*.

You look for proof in earth, wind, and fire, but the greatest proof is *you*.

All the science in the world can't explain love or justice or truth or reason. Materialism can't be true, for truth is not a material. So what is your yearning for love, justice, truth, reason, and beauty? It's your soul yearning for home.

God has put eternity in our hearts, but our bodies are dust. "Our outer nature is wasting away [tired and exhausted] but our inner nature is being renewed every day." God breathed His uncreated breath into dust. If I understand that story correctly, He is still doing it. For His breath is His Spirit, and we are being born of His Spirit.

Well, all of that is rather philosophical and ethereal and can still leave you rather lonely . . . but . . . alone in his cave, Elijah was never less alone. Someone else was with Him. The Word of the Lord came to Him.

If we take our Bibles seriously, we know who that is. It's a guy we know . . . the same guy that showed up under the broom tree. The Angel of Yahweh is no mere angel. He's the God-man who "redeemed Israel from all evil" (Genesis 48:16); who wrestled with Jacob and talked with Abraham.

Jesus came to Elijah under the broom tree. Jesus had baked him the bread and given him the water to sustain him . . . sustain him as he ran away from God and His call.

I vaguely remember my mother making sandwiches for me one day so that I wouldn't be hungry as I ran away from home. "Oh, you're running away? Goodness, Peter, the journey's too much. I had better make you some sandwiches."

That's the love of God in Christ Jesus.

When Elijah was feeling sorry for himself, it was Jesus who felt sorry for him too.

Many times in prayer, helping a person through some awful memory where they feel utterly alone, they'll have a vision of Jesus with them . . . and He's weeping. A few times He has said to the person, "I'm sorry." At first I thought it was wrong. How could He be sorry? Well, it's

not that God had messed up. It's that Jesus is God's heart of infinite compassion. And when we see He is sorry for us, it heals us of being sorry for ourselves.

It's not about hiding our sorrows so as to never feel sorrow for ourselves; healing is in surrendering our sorrows to Him. Then it's not really our sorrows but *His* sorrows, and we taste His sorrows, the fellowship of His sufferings, a communion in sorrows.

On His cross He was overwhelmed, exhausted, and utterly alone for love of you. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" You are being made, born again in His image, His very body.

Well, He was in the cave with Elijah, and perhaps Elijah saw He is the Word behind all words, the sound of sheer silence. The Word he'd heard for all those years, the Word he'd even spoken, was I AM, and He was always with Him . . . Emmanu El: God with us. "I AM with you always."

I think the text implies that as Elijah left the cave, the Word, which was also the sound of sheer silence, was in him.

Paul writes to the Galatians, "How can you turn back to the elements? God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts crying 'Abba! Father!' My little children, I am in labor until Christ be formed in you!"

Elijah's cave is a womb. This world is a womb. And we are being born of the Spirit as Christ is formed in us. We are His body. Paul writes that "the whole creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of glory." The whole creation — and we ourselves have been groaning in labor, in travail.

"Adam, your labor will be toil, and Eve, childbearing will be pain. But you will give birth to the Promised One." (We are "saved through childbearing" — I Timothy 2:15.) All our labor surrendered to Christ is the labor of birth: Christ in us, the Word in us and through us, even as we are being born of the Spirit. We are His body.

I've never seen a person more overwhelmed, tired, and lonely in their labor as my wife. We were alone in a new town, and I couldn't feel her pain. The labor came in waves . . . violent, overwhelming, exhausting . . . like an earthquake or storm . . . but then silence. A rhythm of labor and silence.

"Six days you shall labor and one rest."

Between the contractions, in the silence, we would think about our son. Then Susan wasn't alone in her labor as she groaned in pain. It hurts to give birth, and it hurts to be born. It hurts the son. Jonathan wasn't alone in his pain as he was being born. Perhaps the son is no longer alone in his pain, for his mother has tasted it too. (Jesus said, "Who is my mother? Whoever does the will of my Father.") Susan and Jonathan communed in their pain. Could there be a greater communion?

Then in the silence between contractions I'd speak, and the word of the father came to the bride and came to the son in the womb. I'd speak, and he'd be still.

Well, Elijah came out of the cave, and a voice said, "What are you doing here?" Elijah still says he's exhausted, tired, and lonely. But the voice says, "Go," and he goes. There was still more labor.

Elijah had not yet climbed his last mountain. We know that, because 900 years later he shows up on a mountain again, and once again he meets "the Angel" and "the Word." But this time the Word Angel is in flesh — like glowing, Jewish, carpenter flesh.

As Elijah stands there with Jesus and Moses, this guy named Peter gets so worked up he starts running around making all kinds of noise. God Almighty tells him to shut up. He booms, "Peter, stop! Listen! This is my beloved son."

Let's pray:

"Father, thank you for your Son, born for us, of us, and with us.

The creation groans in the pain of labor;
The earth shakes, but you're not in the earth;
The wind howls, but you're not in the wind;
The fire rages, but you're not in the fire.

Then, a baby . . . in a manger . . . in Bethlehem . . ."

[Song] "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

Brooks, Phillips / Redner, Lewis H.

O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep,
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years,
Are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary
And gathered all above;
While mortals sleep the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love.
O, morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth;

And praises sing to God the King
And peace to men on earth.

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is giv'n;
So God imparts to human hearts,
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin;
Where meek souls will
Receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

O, holy child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels,
The great glad tidings tell;
O, come to us abide with us,
Our Lord, Emmanuel.

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“Thank you, Father, for giving us your son, for faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. So come, Lord God, and make your home in us. Be born in us today. Amen.”

Let me sum up:

The sacrifice was strapped to the wood on the top of the mountain. At high noon the sky grew dark and remained so for three hours. The Word of God in flesh cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Bystanders thought He was calling for Elijah to save Him, but Elijah didn’t come. Perhaps Elijah knew, it wasn’t God who needed saving. God was, in fact, doing the saving. The veil in the temple ripped in two; the earth trembled as if in *labor*. But . . .

God wasn’t in the earthquake;
God wasn’t in the dark wind;
God wasn’t in the temple or the fires within;
God was in the man strapped to the wood,
giving birth to Elijah, His people, His body.

Then in that silence a pagan Roman centurion, like a priest of Baal charged with officiating the sacrifice, looked at the still body of Christ and said, “Surely this was the Son of God.”

Lookout Mountain Community Church, I don't think we need more fire power. Perhaps there is already an "immeasurable greatness of power in us who believe." So then, perhaps we don't "need" more fire power. But we do need to be still and know. Let it be a rhythm in your life . . . until you stand on the last mountain with Jesus.

In Jesus' name, amen.

Further Reading

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. [Selah] There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God will help her right early. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. [Selah] Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has wrought desolations in the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, he burns the chariots with fire! "Be still, and know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!" The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. [Selah]

-Psalm 46

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child quieted at its mother's breast; like a child that is quieted is my soul. O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and for evermore.

-Psalm 131

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

-I Kings 19:11-12

We are most deeply asleep at the switch when we fancy we control any switches at all. We sleep to time's hurdy-gurdy; we wake, if we ever wake, to the silence of God.

-Annie Dillard

This little thing that is made . . . God showed it to me as small as if it had been a hazel-nut. It was so small I thought it might have disappeared. In this blessed revelation God showed me three nothings. Of these nothings this was the first I was shown, and all men and women who wish to lead the contemplative life need to have knowledge of it: they should choose to set at nothing everything that is made so as to have the love of God who is unmade. This is why those who choose to occupy themselves with earthly business and are always pursuing worldly success have nothing here of God in their hearts and souls: because they love and seek their rest in this little thing where there is no rest, and know nothing of God, who is almighty, all wise and all good, for he is true rest. God wishes to be known, and is pleased that we should rest in him; for all that is below him does nothing to satisfy us. And this is why, until all that is made seems as nothing, no soul can be at rest. When a soul sets all at nothing for love, to have him who is everything that is good, then it is able to receive spiritual rest. . . . And after this I saw God in an instant, that is in my understanding, and in seeing this I saw that he is in everything. I looked attentively, knowing and recognizing in this vision that he does all that is done.

-Julian of Norwich

"And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.'"

-Acts 17:26-28

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

-Colossians 1:17

He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.

-Hebrews 1:3a

Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

-Genesis 2:7

So with us; when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe. But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir. . . . My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!

-Galatians 4:3-7, 19

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

-Romans 8:22-23

And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery.

-Revelation 12:1-2

And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. . . . All the writers who wrote about prison but did not themselves serve time there considered it their duty to express sympathy for prisoners and to curse prison. I . . . have served enough time there. I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation: "*Bless you, prison, for having been in my life.*"

-Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

There is an absolute need for the solitary, bare, dark, beyond-thought, beyond-feeling type of prayer. . . . Unless that dimension is there in the Church somewhere, the whole caboodle lacks life and light and intelligence. It is a kind of hidden, secret, unknown stabilizer and compass too. About this I have no hesitation or doubts.

-Thomas Merton