

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
June 12, 2016

“FACEOFF”

“... Have you found me, O my enemy?”
I Kings 21:20

Prelude

Last week we introduced one of the towering figures in biblical literature, the prophet Elijah.

Elijah casts a large shadow over both Old and New Testaments. He was active in ministry in the 9th century BCE. Eight centuries later, in the era Jesus walked on earth, and in the new age Jesus inaugurated, the name of Elijah still had currency, such that we find him variously referenced in both Christian gospels and New Testament letters.

Elijah emerged from obscure origins; we have no birth account or mention of his parentage; he suddenly appears, abruptly pops up, his identity affixed to a place, possibly a clan; **“the Tishbite, of Tisbe, in Gilead”** (I Kings 17:1).

We know more of the close of his life, which is rather detailed, but also chock full of mystery. He is said to have taken flight in the chariot of fire (II Kings 2:11).

Or, as further described, he **“ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.”**

Such an exit is quite rare, a departure conferred only upon an elite, the extraordinarily pious whose lives were deemed exceedingly commendable.

It may seem strange to think of ancients being “spirited” up and down, a la Jacob’s ladder; but we make our own allowances for adventurers to take flight into strange realms of the imagination. Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott was boldly beaming people where no (hu)mans had gone before in the late 1960’s.

There exists in rabbinic literature a rich ascension tradition, which speaks of those who took flight into paradise – either as a final step from here to eternity or temporarily to gain revelation they then employ upon returning to earth;
Enoch – Genesis 5:24; Wisdom of Solomon, 4:10-15;
Moses - see especially Jude 9; Baruch, Ezra;
Ebed Melek, King Zedekiah's Ethiopian eunuch, who rescued Jeremiah from his cistern jail (Jeremiah 38:7);
Hiram of Tyre, the builder of Solomon's Temple;
Jabez (I Chronicle 4:10 – “The Prayer of Jabez,” a prosperity bestseller, which likened God to a “VISA card;” “bless me, Lord, enlarge my borders, and keep me safe;”
Bithiah, Pharaoh's daughter, foster-mother of Moses; in our Christian literature, Paul describes “**an ascension**,” when he speaks of “**knowing a man caught up in the third heaven**” – (see II Corinthian 12:2).

When the disciples trekked their way to the mountain, there to experience Jesus as a transfigured being, we read he was seen to be in the company of Elijah (Mark 9:5).

When Jesus questioned his disciples, asking
“Who do people say that I am?”
the disciples volunteered that
“Some say, Elijah” (Luke 9:18-20).

When Jesus cried from his cross,
“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?
My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
(Psalm 22:1),
bystanders paused and hushed the crowd
saying, **“Listen, he is calling for Elijah”**
(Mark 15:35).

In writing to the Romans,
Paul invokes an episode from Elijah’s life,
asking -
**“Do you not know what
the scripture says of Elijah?”**
evoking a moment of prophetic desperation,
when Elijah thought he and he alone
was holding to the ways in which
God delights (Romans 11:2).

And James, the brother of our Lord,
speaks of Elijah,
framing him as a bright light,
a human being whose prayer was
“powerful and effective”
in disclosing God’s will (James 5:17).

So spending time with Elijah -
seeking insight and understanding
of his prophetic ministry,
should prove beneficial for a people
wanting to honor and heed
“the law and the prophets.”

The lesson this morning - selected verses from the 21st chapter of I Kings - a rather complicated story, involving a man by the name of Naboth, owner of a vineyard located right next door to the palace of King Ahab. Location, location, location.

Ahab looked with envy upon Naboth's vineyard, and proposed an exchange, in an attempt to acquire it as his own. Naboth, though, was not of a mind to sell what scripture calls his "**ancestral inheritance**" (I Kings 21:3). Naboth isn't interested in fair market value, or any appraised arbitration that may come in at a premium. Naboth's inheritance is not for sale.

The king sulks, for in the face of the law, he is bound and limited in what he can do. He is not permitted to seize and take and satisfy his longings. We read that he becomes depressed at being thwarted in his desire to acquire, so much so that he becomes bedbound; he won't cuddle the queen. He won't eat. He doesn't attend staff meetings. The kingdom totters.

The Queen, Jezebel, given the king's incapacitation, takes matters into her own hands. She plots and plans Naboth's death, and expedites the transfer of deed. Ahab gets Naboth's vineyard.

Jezebel's genius?
She involved "**the elders and the nobles.**"
She involved everybody who knew better in doing what was wrong.

The scripture is clear on two key points:

(1) a terrible travesty had occurred,
at the highest levels of society;
murder and theft and false witness;
a lack of institutional control within the heart of
those entrusted to know better

(2) everybody knew what had happened,
and nobody blew a whistle.

Nobody came to Naboth's rescue.

It was all so brazen and brutal,
a sordid affair, wrapped in royalty.

So the question emerges
(at least I hope it does)
are they going to get away with it?

Are they going to get away with it?

We read -

**“Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah
the Tishbite, saying go down to meet King
Ahab of Israel”** (I Kings 21:17).

We read -

**Ahab said to Elijah, Have you found me
O my enemy? Elijah answered, I have found
you. Because you have sold yourself
to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord ...”**
(I Kings 21:20).

What do we extract from this story?

What comes of a “faceoff” with a prophet
like that of Elijah?

It isn't enough to know the story,
as important as that knowledge is.
Scripture is a dead end
 it fails to function,
to take shape and form, in our lives.
So what do we pull from this
episode to serve us today?

Prophets invite us to see life on a
a magnified screen. If we can see a larger
screen, enabling sight such that we see
ourselves consumed with ourselves to
the neglect of others around us, we
stand a chance of being convicted
of leading lesser lives than God ever
designed or desires.

The reformers (Luther) had an understanding
of sin, captured by the Latin phrase,
“**incurvatus in se.**” We are bent, curved,
upon ourselves in way that plays havoc
with the world and our relationships.
Prophets “find us,” as Elijah found Ahab,
they confront us, demanding that we see
more than ourselves.

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Prophets “**get in the way.**”
The prophetic element of our faith
invites us to “**stand up**” to the powers
that aggrieve, to **stand with** those that
suffer hardship at the hands of others.
They are willing to face personal danger.

Prophets “**get us thinking**” in ways we
would otherwise dismiss; they inspire
us to consider doing what we might
otherwise opt to not. They speak

that we might not sulk or slink our lives
away in a sorry silence.

Prophets serve to keep us from selling
ourselves into a bondage of a lesser good;
they serve to keep us engaged, in quest,
for the greater good, which we define as
the will of God.

Prophets -
Dr. ML King;

Malcolm X (1925-1965) -
... got in the way ... he stood up ...
... he was willing to stand up and stand with others...
 his pilgrimage to Mecca was life changing;
 his “screen” view of life altered, enlarged;
 he became a new person;

“I remember one night ...
with nothing but the sky overhead,
I lay awake amid sleeping Muslim brothers,
and I learned that pilgrims from every land—
every color, and class, and rank;
high officials and the beggar alike—
all snored in the same language.”

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Muhammad Ali (1942-2016)

A funeral on Friday - free tickets were given out, but the demand
was so great, people were selling what they had received as a gift,
to honor and salute Mohammed Ali ... more than an athlete, an
Olympian; more than an entertainer; so exceptional, talented,
so bold, brash; who embraced a faith; who assumed a new name;
who refused to be tied to a past and legacy of racial servitude.
He “got in the way” of a war.

Once said to be the singularly most recognizable person on the planet.

**"Float like a butterfly. Sting like a bee.
You can't hit what your eyes don't see."**

"Impossible is just a word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in the world they've been given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing."

We all have a “prophetic” power within us,
Holy Spirit power, child of God power,
to **“get in the way”** when “powers”
would have us be less that God desires.

Every Christian has a “trump card”
to play in the game of life.
Every Christian has daily opportunity
in the faceoff with life to
say “no,” to say “yes.”

No, I’m not for sale.
No, I have principles that I will not forsake.
No, I resist.
No, I have a Savior to whom I am accountable.
And yes, I live for one who lives in me,
who loves me, who loves us,
so much that leaving us
as we are when lost and full of fear
would be the most unloving thing to do,
who leads us out of ourselves
that we might find ourselves
in blessed company,
forging a world

more in keeping
with God's loving design.

This is the creative tension that
stirs in us, that would have us
“getting in the way” of life being
less than God would have it.

It is summed up in I John
“**as (Christ) is, so are we in the world**”
(I John 4:17).

This is the faceoff we dare not avoid.
This is our challenge as a church.
And when we accept it, when we work
and pray it, when we display it,
then God is glorified, and we are living
as God intends – both now and forever.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*