

Caves

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Ancient Witness: 1 Kings 1-16

We all know that story about Elijah, that fiery prophet that he was and his confrontation with Ahab and Jezebel. He simply would not stand for compromise. He would not back down from his principles and faith. Baal worship, in his eyes, was suffocating the faith of the Holy One. He was a prophet of exclusive devotion.

In our story, our hero has just shown the prophets of Baal a thing or two in a kind of rendition of “dueling altars” on top of Mount Carmel. Elijah and his God, according to the story, put the rest of the false prophets to shame with a fantastic light show. The crowd was so impressed that they obeyed Elijah and killed the Baal prophets. By the way, I don’t believe for a minute that God sanctioned the killing, though it was done in the name of God.

But as the story goes, our hero runs. He takes off into the desert like a jackrabbit. And so there he is—alone and helpless. And this is where we find him. Tired, hungry, thirsty and afraid for his own skin. He is in a cave on Mount Horeb after 40 nights and days in the desert—a good long time.

Now in that cave, our hero has hit rock bottom, emotionally, spiritually and physically. He’s exhausted. Out there in the desert he has given up. “It is enough, now, O God, take away my life.” (1 Kings 19:4) He was a helpless man in a hopeless situation. And now he says to God, “I, even I only am left: and they seek my life to take it away.”

Now, about four hundred years earlier, at possibly the same exact place on Mount Horeb, Moses asked God to appear to him, also. Moses said, “I pray thee, show me thy glory.” The text says that God responds, “I will make all my goodness pass before you... but you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live... I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.” (Exodus 33:18-23) So this is why Elijah wraps his face with his cloak in anticipation of God’s presence, because like Moses, he needed to be protected from seeing God’s presence directly.

Many times God had come in the form of a fire, storm and earthquake. And whereas Moses saw the back of God in a miraculous event, a grand entrance, our hero waits. And waits. In this story we encounter a very different way of God appearing. We hear that God is not in the fire, as on Mount Carmel, not in the wind, and not in the earthquake. Instead, God appears in a “still, small voice” or in “sheer silence.”

What a strange way to account this story. Why does the author go to the trouble to mention the fire, wind and earthquake?

And behold the Lord passed by and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind and

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 still small voice. (1 Kings 19:11b-12)

Could it be that this indicates that our hero's violent measures on Mount Carmel were not really the ways of God after all? In this case, at least, God does not come in the spectacular, supernatural way. God's presence does not come externally, but internally.

There is a story of a man caught in a flood. You've probably heard it. When the water was one foot high a fire truck came by, and the people yelled to him, "Hop on! Evacuate the area." But he said, "Don't worry about me. God will save me." And when the water was about five feet high people came by boat and said, "Jump in! Save yourself!" But he said, "I'm not worried. God will save me." And when the water was ten feet high, and he was sitting on his roof with his feet dangling in the water, a helicopter flies by and the people said, "Grab hold of the rope. Save yourself!" But he says, "God will save me."

Well, the water rises and he is swept away and drowns. And, as the story goes, when he sees God face to face, he asks God, "Where were you? I waited and waited, and you didn't come to save me." And God says to him, "What do you mean? First I sent a fire truck, then a boat, and then a helicopter." The point is that God is present in our experience if we can only recognize it.

Spirituality is ultimately not about knowledge or understanding, doctrine or dogma. It's about *experience*. Scripture and the tradition are very important, but only if they lead us to inner experience of God's presence.

In Elijah's story, God becomes present in an imperceptible still, small voice, a voice that would have been easy not to notice. This was something new, something unexpected. Because back then, people did all kinds of things to get in touch with God. They went into the wilderness; they made sacrifices; they climbed mountains—all kinds of things.

But here Elijah moves toward God in a dark, silent cave, a symbol of the depth and darkness of his being. And out of this chasm of self-doubt and fear, Elijah discovers somehow confidence and direction. He finds at least one more meaningful act—to anoint Elisha to take his place.

About 20 years ago I also felt pursued by the violent "prophets of Baal," those enforcers of religious expression.

In the Presbyterian Church, there were some churches and people with us—willing to stand up to Ahab and Jezebel, with a clear and decisive "No!" "No, we will not obey these policies that are unjust and ungodly. We cannot read the Bible in a way that excludes gay and lesbian members from being open and unashamed." My church was the flagship of the More Light movement in the Presbyterian church. In the U.C.C. it was called Open and Affirming. And I was the first minister to be put on trial in the Presbyterian courts and defrocked for my congregation's dissent, noncompliance and open inclusion. And slowly I felt these churches and people fall away, even the leadership of my own congregation lost their nerve and cut a deal. And I looked up and said, "It looks like I'm the only one left." There were days when I feel particularly alone and forsaken, when I could relate with Elijah's desire to give it up: "It is enough; now O God, take away my life."

I never realized how important my career was to me until I lost it. It was a helpless, lonely feeling. I had always been able to provide for my family. But now, I felt kind of useless, to tell you the truth. Like a doctor that could not practice medicine or a lawyer that could not practice law, I was a minister who had my credentials taken away.

There were some well-meaning and loving people, who tried to cheer me up, saying, “You’ll find something. Everything will be fine.” But I just couldn’t hear that at the time. It didn’t match my interior landscape. I was in a cave, and it was very dark, and very quiet. I didn’t see any clear path ahead of me. I didn’t hear any answers. There was only groping around in the blackness.

Here on the Palouse they have celebrated LGBT Pride in the Fall instead of June, but today is Open and Affirming Sunday. But I can testify that the inclusion and full equality now enjoyed in many churches happened only because of years of struggle and sacrifice.

Many of us find ourselves in this cave for other reasons—divorce, the end of a relationship, the death of someone who is the sun and the moon to us, an illness, or some other tragedy. All can leave us paralyzed and numb, hopeless and despairing.

One of the obvious spiritual writers who addressed this experience was John of the Cross of the 16th century. Faith, for this great mystic and poet, is “a dark night for the soul... and the more it darkens the soul the more it also gives light.” For him, light and darkness, joy and suffering, cannot be separated. God is present in the dark stillness. He wrote:

*The eternal spring lies hidden,
How well I know its hiding place,
Even when it is night.*

*In the dark night of this life
How well I know in faith the sacred spring,
Even when it is night.*

*I do not know its source, for it has none,
But I know that every source comes from it.
Even when it is night.*

Another poet, Rilke, wrote in his *Book of Hours*, “My God is dark.” He sees a thousand theologians plunging like divers into the night of God’s name. The poet says, “You darkness from which I come, I love you more than the flame that sets boundaries.” Darkness and silence are like a womb—holding everything and embracing everything. Again, the poet says, “And maybe in this darkness a great energy stirs right near me. I trust in night.”

In the *Book of Wisdom*, the writer expresses this similar conviction:

When night in its swift course has reached its half-way point, and deep silence embraced everything, the eternal Word leaped from the heavenly throne.

When night is at its deepest and darkest, where there is sheer silence, this is the time for the Voice to emerge. It is a pregnant time. It is a holy time. In dark silence, God utters unspeakable things.

There's a famous poem by Rumi in which this person is in despair and "for many long nights" he has prayed in vain for answers. He finally falls silent in his suffering and a messenger speaks God's answer:

*Your shout, "O God!" is my shout, "Here I am!"
Your pain and your imploring is but a message from me.
And all your striving to reach me—
Is a sign that I draw you to me!
Your love's anguish is my goodwill towards you.
In the cry, "O God!" are a hundred "Here I am!"*

And so here's how I understand it today: It's O.K. to be in that cave. You don't have to let anyone console you out of it. Go ahead and be inconsolable! One can say, "If you don't mind, I'm just going to stay in here for a while."

It's O.K. to go into the darkness, into the silence, into the loneliness, into the feelings of abandonment. It's O.K. to cry out, "O God!" and to give yourself over to aloneness.

Simone Weil was a student of John of the Cross. In her pilgrimage, she worked in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the anti-Fascists. She advanced the idea of frontline nurses who would give aid at the very places of death. She joined the parachuters in France to fight in the underground resistance. She imposed a hunger ration on herself, eating only as much that was apportioned to Jews in France out of solidarity with them. She died because of this. And she wrote:

When you... can no longer suppress the cry, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" ...you will finally touch something that is no longer affliction and not joy either, but the pure, most inward essential being common to both joy and suffering.

It is at the point where we give up that we find, when we can no longer suppress the cry, when we enter the darkness and let it cover us, that we hear the still, small voice.