

I. ELIJAH IS LARGER-THAN-LIFE “HERO.”

A. ***He is a character who fits none of our categories or explanation. So says Walter Brueggemann, a Biblical scholar from our own Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta. Brueggemann is also one who is described as “passionate” about the Old Testament.***

1. “Elijah plays by no rules that we know..with no restraints on the possible.”
2. Suggests Dr Brueggemann, “we must take care not to reduce this awesome (prophet) or try to explain him away...to fit our timid reason, because if we do, we miss the point and the story evaporates.”
3. Like Jesus, Elijah remains completely submissive to YHWH.
 - a. He is “immune to human pressures.”
4. In order to understand Jesus, I believe we need to study Elijah. Both men shared similar traits and similar miraculous feats.
 - a. Moses and Elijah parted the waters; Jesus walked on water.
 - b. Moses and Elijah appeared on a mountaintop with Jesus; all 3 were transfigured by God.
 - c. Elijah raised the dead; so did Jesus.
 - d. Elijah is expected to return and sit in his chair at the Passover; Jesus is present in our midst at Holy Communion.
 - e. Elijah ascended into heaven in a whirlwind; Jesus did so in the clouds.

B. ***Dr Brueggemann insists we accept this story as a legend, something which “moves beyond reality...his presentation and acceptance (by the people in Israel) help us see why those who witnessed Jesus mistook him for Elijah.”***

1. In 1 Kings he stands toe to toe with Ahaziah, the last king of the Omri dynasty in the Northern Kingdom and defeats him and his vast entourage who are faithful to Baal and not God.
 - a. In chapter 3 a new king appears.
2. Chapter 2 is all about Elijah, the old prophet and great hero, and a new young prophet who tags along, by the name of Elisha,
 - a.

as if to suggest that this transfiguration and ascension occurs between the pages of history, in a realm only faith is able to grasp, a realm of God’s total providence alone.

3. So also the transfiguration, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.
 - a. Which is to say, history does not attempt to explain it, it does not describe it, and you and it do not comprehend it!
4. It is given to us only by the grace of God and through the Holy Spirit.
5. I love to listen to the powerful music and oratorio of Mendelssohn’s “Elijah!”
 - a. Have you ever heard it?
 - b. Mendelssohn patterned it after the work of his two Baroch heros, Bach and Handel. “Elijah” gained for Felix Mendelssohn fame and recognition as a great composer of the 1800’s, a pioneer of the Romantic movement.
 - c. He uses several scenes from 1 Kings to “*produce intensely — almost luridly — dramatic scenes,*” according to one music critic.
 - d. Curiously, Mendelssohn who was born a Jew, “in the final section of the oratorio, draws a few parallels between the lives of Elijah and Jesus.”
 - e. A pastor Julius Schubring was one of the writers of the libretto or lyrics. He wanted to instill a Christian flavor in the Oratorio, but Mendelssohn insisted Elijah must be presented in his own right.

[PAUSE]

- II. IN THE FACE OF THE AWESOMENESS OF ELIJAH, AND IMMEDIATELY BEFORE HIS GLORIOUS DEPARTURE, THE YOUNGER PROPHET, THE BEGINNER, ELISHA IS SO APTLY DESCRIBED AS A "TAG-ALONG."
- A. ***There on the banks of the Jordan River, this new man's credentials are publicly validated, the transition of office is properly witnessed, but Elisha is completely dwarfed and overshadowed!***
1. He has an impossible legacy to live up to.
 - a. How could he ever hope to be a success?
 - b. to fill the sandals, wear the mantle,
 - c. or carry the staff of the only man who goes up to Heaven without dying!
 2. But before all this happens, before Elijah is ready to retire, he tells Elisha God must send him on a little trip of several days.
 3. His instruction to the younger man is surprising: both by its brevity of two words and it seems to diminish or demean: "Stay here."
 4. Elijah purports return one last time to Gilgal, to Bethel and Jericho – all three very important cities in the cult of Judaism,
 - a. towns where there are small local clubs of prophets still faithful to God.
 5. Remember some of the people Jesus healed; he told them to stay here, to go back to your families, but not to follow him?
 - a. How many obeyed? Almost none!
 6. At his ascension to heaven, Jesus gives one critical instruction to his 11 disciples:
 - a. He tells them to go back into Jerusalem and to "Wait."
 - b. There is a good reason for waiting: "Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."
 6. No one wants to wait, to stay behind, because we do not have all the tools and marching orders. We want to get on the bus also, we do not want to miss any of the action, much less think we might get in the way before we are ready.
 - a. I used to have a poster in my bedroom of a cat sitting and staring out of a window. The caption says, "They also serve who wait upon the Lord."
 7. Jesus does promise us, There is a time when you will be sent,
 - a. in power,
 - b. with my full blessing,
 - c. and your joy will be full.
 - d. You will do greater things than I, your master..
- B. ***But Elisha openly refuses to stay there on the safe side of the Jordan River:***
1. "As the LORD YHWH lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you."
 - a. It is a sacred oath that invokes God's personal name.
 - b. He repeats this vow three times, so Elisha relents.
 - c. The word "leave" implies something like abandonment.
 - d. It is like Ruth's vow to her mother-in-law. She will not go back to her Moabite people, for Naomi's God is now her God, Naomi's family is her family, Naomi's future is now Ruth's future. Abandonment is no option.
 2. He has a bit of the impulsive and risk-taking, he marches to no one else's rules much as his master does. Maybe that is something in the new prophet which appeals to the old Elijah.
 3. I remember when my interim position at John Knox Presbyterian Church on the west side of Houston ended on January 1st. I was without work until May. I was

desperate for job interviews and I wanted to stay in the Houston area.

- a. I was invited to go to Webster out on the Gulf of Houston to interview for the interim position. As I waited in the church lobby for my interview, I (page 2) sensed that I might be out of my comfort zone. It was a newer state of the art gorgeous facility. The church was across the street from the NASA Space Center. The contemporary stained glass windows depicted the stars and the moon as photographed by astronauts. 4 or 5 of the current astronaut families were members in that large church. The interim position was for head of staff in a 900-plus member church. My interview followed the interview of an attractive, very professionally-dressed young woman in her early 30's. I did not get the job.
- b. So I waited in Houston in my apartment four months. I could not move, as I was still undergoing physical therapy at an orthopedic center for recent surgery on my right shoulder.
- c. In the spring I was interviewed for the senior pastor position in a wonderful church in Conroe, one of the fastest-growing suburbs outside of Houston. I got the job, and it was a job I was not ready for. I followed a very successful and popular pastor who worked 60 hours a week and did everything. He left the church to become our area representative with the Board of Pensions, Dr. Rick Young. I was purposely hired because I was different from Dr. Young. I also made many mistakes. We had an excellent full time staff of 5 other people including a private nursery school. I felt just like a young Elisha following in the footsteps of the legendary Elijah! The church grew in membership while I served there. There were about 15 baptisms. We went through two hurricanes: Katrina and Rita! We had a good youth pastor, Scott Cummings who had two young boys. I was invited to baptize the second son, and I remember my sermon title was taken from one of our hymns today, "Bless the Prophets' Sons."
 - (i) I am so grateful for that learning and growing opportunity.

C. ***So the tag-along prophet-designate goes with Elijah on his last mission. Three important events on that trip are to shape the new prophet's career.***

1. First Elisha receives Elijah's mantle before they cross the Jordan.
 - a. The mantle has always been an object of curiosity, people wondering if that mantle implied power and the authority of YHWH's Spirit.
 - b. After Elijah is taken up into heaven in the whirlwind (not in a chariot of fire as a few paintings depict the scene), Elisha notices the mantle had fallen to the ground. When Elisha saw it, he rips off his own clothes, tears them into pieces and places Elijah's mantle on his back.
2. Second, Elisha meets the small band of prophets near Jericho. That is important, for they will become his disciples later on.
3. Third, Elijah says he will grant one request to his successor.
 - a. It is a bold one: "*I want a double share of your ruach, your energy, your spirit.*"
 - b. Only God may give you that, Elijah replies. He will have to wait to see if he truly receives such a power.

III. NOTICE ELIJAH PARTED THE WATERS OF THE RIVER TO CROSS OVER FROM THE POLITICAL, SETTLED

ESTABLISHMENT SIDE TO THE WILDERNESS, TO THE UNTAMED, UNPREDICTABLE SIDE OF THE JORDAN, WHERE GOD'S MYSTERY PREVAILS.

A. ***There it is he and Elisha have their transitional meeting.***

1. It is where Jesus will go to be baptized by John,
2. where Jesus gets his marching orders and validation.
 - a. God says, "*This is my son with whom I am well pleased.*" (page 3)
 - b. The same statement will be repeated at Jesus' transfiguration.
3. Elisha must strike the waters not only to return to where he was told to stay and wait, but also to validate the double gift of power, of the Holy Spirit.
 - a. The new prophetic voice of Northern Israel takes his mantle and strikes the water in the name of "The God of Elijah," as if he does not yet have full confidence in his new career.
 - b. "*Where is the LORD, YHWH, the God of Elijah?*"
4. The Jordan divides as it had for Elijah; he comes back across to the side where everyone lives and works. He is ready to begin, to be sent forth.
5. The band of 50 prophets from Jericho are watching; they now believe he has the full baptism of the Spirit.
6. But they delay. They want to go and look for Elijah in the wilderness.
 - a. They are not yet fully disposed to follow a new master.
 - b. This request is almost like the request of Jesus' followers who want to go back and bury their parents.
 - c. When a new pastor or leader comes, with your voice you may say you are ready to follow, but you will say it while looking over your shoulder behind you.
 - d. You might once or twice throw in the 7 famous last words, (do you know what the 7 last words are?) "*We never did it that way before.*"
7. At first Elisha refuses to allow a search party –it must be all or nothing.
 - a. But then he says, OK, for he realizes when they fail to find Elijah they will be willing to leave everything behind them.
8. Later Elisha cannot resist one last, "I told you so!" but his remark is framed in the same language that Elijah had used, "*Did I not say to you. 'Do not go?'*"
 - a. In other words, "Stay here, and wait."

B. ***What makes the critical difference between staying and waiting, or being sent out to follow a new leader, thus risking a venture into a mysterious, untamed future?***

1. Here it is not so much a summons or a command.
2. Nor does it depend on protocol or proper procedure or human words.
3. Everything here depends on the gift of God's Spirit which is beyond human control. It is inscrutable, sometimes wildly irrational, larger than your life.
 - a. We see a new man, "a new creation."
 - b. When your new pastor gets here, some of you will be impatient to go out and change the world. But you will have to wait until the Spirit says: Go.
4. Elisha's first two official activities are strange, as if to vindicate this notion of God's Spirit being untamed and a mystery.
 - a. He goes into Jericho and purifies the bad drinking water, he makes it miraculous water and whoever drinks of it will not die, something like Jesus' gift of the water of life.

- b. Secondly as he is re-tracing Elijah's step backwards, he walks toward Bethel. Before he gets there, about 50 small boys come out of the city and make fun of him, "Baldy, Baldy, Baldy!" Elisha summon two of the most dangerous bears there are- she bears- who come out of the woods and badly maul 42 of the boys.
 - c. That is a message to all Israel not to take him lightly, neither little boys, not the king, nor anyone. For he has the mantle and Spirit of Yahweh.
5. Elisha will never become another "Elijah," or even one like "Moses."
6. He is a prophet in his own right. His name means, "My God saves."
- a. It is much the same as the name and title we give to Jesus, "My Savior," or, "One who saves." (page 4)

Now may all of God's children respond by saying...."Amen!"