

The Divided Kingdom (930-725 BCE)

Elijah the Prophet

Readings: *1 Kings 17:1-19:21*

Reflections:

- The story of Elijah introduces us to a leader who in many ways parallels the previous great leaders of the Israel. Abraham, Moses, David and Elijah would all share in some significant parallel experiences and in their own ways foreshadow the coming Messiah. It is Moses and Elijah that appear with Jesus on the mount (Matthew 17:3,4; Mark 9:4,5; Luke 9:30-33) representing the giver of the Law and the greatest of the Prophets. Elijah's leadership is marked by dramatic miracles and will be the first of Israel's final wave of leaders in preparation for the coming Messiah. The three waves of Israel's leaders can be summarized as Moses and the Spirit empowered leaders (e.g. Joshua and the Judges), David and the Kingly leaders (e.g. Saul, Absalom, Solomon, etc.), Elijah and the Prophetic leaders (e.g. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, etc.). One could try to find parallels to the three leadership roles of Priest (Moses), King (David) and Prophet (Elijah) but this probably is stretching the understanding of what is unfolding. God is revealing what doesn't work and he uses three forms of leadership to reveal his heart and mind to this little struggling nation. Moses (and to a lesser degree Joshua) combines a governmental and charismatic (spirit-led) form of leadership in such a way as they possess no real title other than friend of God and servant leader of Israel. David possesses more of the pure governmental role and Elijah and the prophets possess more of a pure charismatic or spirit-led role. In these ways God reveals that what is ultimately important is not the form of leadership that exists but whether or not people serve Him as their ultimate king. All other forms of leadership exist simply to help the larger community experience God as their king. The exact form that servant leadership takes is ultimately secondary and at God's discretion.
- Elijah comes on the scene at a time of judgment as the nation falls under a drought and famine. He boldly declares that no rain will fall except for by God's command through him (that is boldness!). Elijah's first miracle of being fed by ravens and drinking by a brook reminds the readers of the Israelites in the wilderness and God's ability to supernaturally care for his people. When the brook dries up it is fascinating that God does not command him to strike a rock to get water (as one might expect with the

implied parallels) but instead God sends him to a Gentile widow. The new rock of miraculous provision becomes a jar of flour and a jar of oil that does not run out for the widow, her son and Elijah. This must have hit the readers between the eyes! As Jesus points out in Luke 4, "I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed--only Naaman the Syrian." Yikes! God is using a Gentile widow? Talk about breaking the rules and causing some scandal. This holy Prophet of God is living with a single Gentile woman and her son and God's miraculous power is passing by all of Israel but resting on this little home.

- The widow herself shows why she is chosen. She trusts God and his word. She must give her last bit of food to Elijah before God opens up the miraculous provision for her and her son. Talk about a huge step of faith that looks completely ridiculous. But God works through her and Elijah is cared for. Now, when her son dies we see in her despair she doubts and questions God. Yet, God does not judge her but works through the compassion of Elijah to restore her son to life. This miracle finds striking parallel in the story of the first Christ-followers in Acts 20:7-12. When the widow sees her son alive again she believes, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth." This captures the kind of faith God desires to grow in all his people.
- Finally the time comes for Elijah to confront Ahab and bring rain back to Israel. We are introduced to Obadiah, a leader who has helped to preserve a small remnant of faithful priests. Obadiah doesn't have the courage to confront Ahab alone but sets up a meeting between Elijah and Ahab. This confrontation represents one of the greatest confrontations within the story of Israel, paralleling the confrontation of Moses and the Pharaoh. Elijah's challenge rings across the centuries, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him, but if Baal is God, follow him."
- The actual telling of this story captures one of the most dramatic events with the narrative of Israel: Elijah's mocking of the Prophets, the Prophets' self-mutilation, the dousing of the sacrifice with huge jars of water three times, Elijah's bold confident prayer, and finally the all consuming fire from heaven. The prophets of Baal are slain and God's vindication culminates in the outpouring of rain on the thirsty land. One would think that such a stunning victory would leave Elijah on a high that would last him years. But as we will see, God's leaders are fully human and prone to full emotional swings from triumphant faith to terrifying fear. Elijah is empowered by God to run ahead of Ahab but instead of running with confidence to confront Jezebel, he runs in fear to hide. "Elijah was afraid and ran for his life." As he collapses in the desert, his emotional defeat is complete: "I have had enough, Lord,...take my life; I am no better

than my ancestors.” He sees himself as a complete and utter failure. In his weakness and discouragement, he is not judged by God but to the contrary, God miraculously nourishes him with sleep and food before calling him into an intimate encourage back at mount Horeb, the place of divine revelation and the giving of the Law. There in a cave, Elijah pours out his despair to God and the apparent hopelessness of his situation. God does not rebuke Elijah or try to correct him. God does something very profound in this moment. He clarifies for Elijah how He as God works. God uses the symbols of a power wind, earthquake and fire to demonstrate his miraculous powers through nature but reveals to Elijah that God was not in any of them. Finally a gentle whisper comes and it is heard in the gentle whisper Elijah connects with God. What a powerful lesson. We look for God in the dramatic and powerful demonstrations of his miracles and yet even when those happen our hearts are often still left vulnerable to doubt and fear and asking, “God where are you?” Just as Elijah has seen the fire from God and yet within hours doubted God. It was only in the intimate personal experience of hearing God’s whisper was Elijah’s faith restored. God is not looking to wow us with his power but to lure us into true friendship through his whisper. He wants us to trust him because we know his heart not because we are overwhelmed by his might.

- Elijah is refocused and commissioned by God to take up his leadership role once again. Elijah’s great feelings of being completely alone are assured by God in two very dramatic ways. First, Elijah is given two strong leaders to anoint as kings to serve as his allies, he is given a personal ministry partner in Elisha, and he is assured of seven thousand who will serve the cause of God, those who have not bowed to worship the Baal. God demonstrates his grace, his understanding of his leaders who are weak and made of dust, and his compassion on people who feel alone and need companionship. In all of this we are reminded that we can trust God completely and can trust him to lead us, provide for us, and meet our needs as we draw near to listen, trust and follow God’s gentle whisper.