

“ELIJAH THE TISHBITE, A MAN LIKE US.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Text for the Sermon: I Kings 17:1-2; James 5:17-18

Introduction.

If you are reading along in I Kings, when you turn the page to chapter 17 Elijah the Tishbite steps onto the canvas of Scripture from out of nowhere. Like a meteor flashing across a dark sky. His sudden appearance makes him somehow a grand and romantic figure. We are drawn to and fascinated by this unique character, and his abrupt declaration underscores his mystery.

If we are going to study the life of an individual it helps to know something of the history they were a part of. And when we learn something of the history, his sudden appearance will make more sense to us.

He served during the reigns of King Ahab and Ahaziah, from 870s to 842 b.c. He appeared on the stage of public action during one of the darkest hours of Israel's sad history.

The nation of Israel was in a moral free fall. Never before had the favored nation sunk so low, grievously and willfully rejecting God's Word and departing from God.

For well over 100 years Israel had been ruled by three great, famous and flawed men, Saul, David and Solomon. In the 58 years that had passed since the kingdom had been rent in two following the death of Solomon no less than seven kings had reigned over the ten northern tribes, and all of them without exception were wicked men.

From the seeds planted by Solomon's pagan wives, his son Jeroboam introduced the first fruits of idolatry among the people of Israel.

I will just go back to Ahab's father Omri.

King Omri. 885-874 bc

I King 16:25-26 Omri did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did more evil than all who were before him. 26 For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and in the sins that he made Israel to sin, provoking the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger by their idols.

For six decades there had been bloodshed and assassinations, murder and malice, intrigue and immorality, conspiracy and deception, hatred and idolatry and Omri topped them all.

King Ahab. 874-853 bc

I King 16:30-33 And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, *more than all who were before him*. 31 And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, *he took for his wife Jezebel* the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him. 32 He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. 33 And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger *than all the kings of Israel who were before him*.

Ahab becomes the new standard for evil. How did he raise the bar?

This is the first time a wife of one of the kings is mentioned. This is part of the “worse than all others” part of the story, a political marriage with the powerful and influential Phoenicians.

I King 21:25-26 (There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. 26 He acted very abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord cast out before the people of Israel.)

Ahab may have ruled Israel, but Jezebel ruled Ahab. She started Baal worship in Israel. Baal was a rain and fertility god, a fertility cult, dominated by temple prostitution and sexual perversion.

She brought in 450 Baal cult priests and paid them herself. She built a huge temple in Samaria to house the idol worship. She destroyed the altars to Yahweh and killed the Lord’s prophets and priests (I Kings 18:4). Out of all Israel only seven thousand would not bend the knee.

Even pagans regarded Baalism as bad, perverse, deviant, violent and immoral. Jezebel presided over a cultural sexual revolution, with every sexual deviancy and perversion and shameful lust we hear of today.

So to sum it up Ahab was far worse than his father Omri, and Omri was worse than all the kings before him. Ahab reached a new high in lows. He shattered all the previous records for rebellion and wickedness.

How is Ahab’s idolatry from his wife different from Solomon’s idolatry from his wives?

"Though Jeroboam's idolatrous syncretism was abominable in the sight of God, Ahab's gods actually replaced Jehovah!" (Getz, p. 8). Baalism became the state approved, government supported religion.

"If God does not exist, everything is permissible" (Fyodor Dostoyevski, *The Brothers Karamazov*).

Ahab and Jezebel simply didn't care any more about God or what God says. The light of God's truth had been all but extinguished. Spiritual death was over the land like a pall. It appeared as though Satan was indeed victorious.

When things get that bad it is right to assume and expect God to wash His hands of it all. And why shouldn't He?

God is not absent, God is not silent. God is God even in the worst of times, God is God even when you are sure things absolutely cannot get any worse. It is in times like this God is most present. He send the first great prophet for such a time as this.

"He was the eminentest prophet reserved for the corruptest age" Bishop Hall (Pink, 7).

"The most illustrious prophet Elijah was raised up in the reign of the most wicked of the kings of Israel" (quoted in Pink, p. 13).

Elijah has been called the mightiest of the prophets. God raises up great men out of difficult times.

Elijah, what does his name mean?

Yah is El, Yahweh is God, My God is Jehovah, The Lord is my God, Jehovah is my strength.

Imagine that first introduction to King Ahab. "My name is Yahweh is God!" His name is symbolic of his mission which is to confess that Yahweh is his God. God sends a man of God with a name of God to confront Ahab and Jezebel and their Baal and Asherah.

Tishbite from Tishbe, where is that?

We call him Elijah the Tishbite, but we are none the wiser for it. It's an obscure reference to an unknown location.

Gilead, where is that?

It is east of the Jordan River in modern day Jordan. As an inhabitant of Gilead he may have belonged to the tribe of either Gad or Manasseh, for Gilead was divided between them.

"Gilead ... was wild and rugged; its hills were covered with shaggy forests; its awful solitudes were only broken by the dash of mountain streams; its valleys were the haunt of fierce wild beasts" (Pink, 13).

"The people of those hills reflected the nature of their environment: They were rough and rugged, solemn and stern, dwelling in rude villages and subsisting by keeping flocks of sheep. Hardened by an open-air life, dressed in a cloak of camel's hair, accustomed to spending most of his time in solitude, possessed of sinewy strength which enabled him to endure great physical strain, Elijah would present a marked contrast with the town dwellers in the lowland valleys, and more especially would he be distinguished from the pampered courtiers of the palace" (Pink, p. 14).

A coarse and crude, rough and rugged place and people, not polished or sophisticated. Elijah is a mountain man, an OT hillbilly, without protocol, royal or courtly manners. A hard man for hard times. The road ahead was rough, it would take a rough man to travel it.

In Elijah we see once again God's judgment on appearances, pretense, externals, on all that we judge to be important. (Christmas and Easter are two other times God does this).

Matthew 11:7-9 Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

Soft men in soft clothes living in comfort are seldom inclined to do hard work, spiritual heavy lifting. We live in soft times, no wonder we don't see men like Elijah.

But what about what James says?

Elijah, a man like us.

James 5:17 Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.

Was he really "a man just like us"? (NIV)

Was he "a man subject to like passions as we are"? (KJV)

How was he like us? How were his passions like ours? Would you say you were like him?

First, all around him was false worship, sexual immorality, neglect of God and rebellion against God. He lived in a world like ours. The times never really change, there is nothing new under the sun. Sin is sin.

Second, notice God is never a God of the status quo. Notice again the kind of people God uses. He sends a nobody from nowhere. God always chooses the weak and foolish, the small, the insignificant. He is a simple man, a bit rough around the edges, not so refined. His story can be our story.

God doesn't choose us based on our looks, personality, intelligence, background, abilities or talents. God chooses what is weak and foolish so there is no boasting. God will not have us remain proud. He will humble us. We must fight the demon of pride; the idol of ego.

Isaiah 66:2 ... this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

If we boast, let us boast in our weakness and His strength. We have a treasure in clay jars. His grace is sufficient, we go in His strength, not ours. Don't despise God's humbling, and don't dismiss God's calling.

I Corinthians 1:27-31 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

God chooses what men reject. We should never be surprised by God's ways.

Don't be drawn in by celebrities and celebrity pastors.
Don't trust a man who doesn't walk with a limp.

God looks for men and women who don't go along with the crowd, who don't follow the culture and the culture's gods, who will speak up in the face of evil and injustice and lies.

Some who quietly stand against abortion, sexual immorality, racism, poverty, injustice.
Some who defend the name of God, who publicly confess Jesus.

Who is there who is willing to stand alone for God? Have you ever stood alone for Christ?

II Timothy 4:16-17 At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! 17 But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me.

God looks for men who are willing to stand alone for Him in difficult times.

Someone with boldness, courage, discernment to say no or that's wrong.
Someone to go toe to toe with idolaters and say God is God.

Elijah is God's servant to stand in the gap, to face the full force of the worst evil.
He immediately goes face to face and toe to toe with the king. In your face.

Would we rather be in the palace courts with Ahab or in the wilderness with Elijah?

God's ways and means are not ours. He chooses unlikely candidates and unusual methods.

The world increasingly needs men with backbone.

Men who will be faithful husbands who actually love and speak well of their wives.

Women who will be faithful wives, who speak well of their husbands.

Men who will be faithful fathers, leading, loving, disciplining in a godly manner.

Women who will be faithful mothers, sacrificing for their children.

Men who will be faithful employees, with integrity, not backbiting or complaining.

Women who have a quiet and gentle spirit, not gossips, not critical or nagging.

Christians who are salt and light, who make the most of these evil days for the glory of Christ.

Christians who pray earnestly to God and make a difference in the world around them.

Christians of whom the world must take notice, that they have been with Jesus.

Holy Father, we thank you for the example of a man who had no fear because he feared you so much. Father, we live in such tumultuous, unsettling days, days of moral decay, raise up Elijahs. Grant us faith and prayer and courage and boldness wherever we might need it even this week. In Jesus' name. Amen.