

God's Community of Support 1Kings17
Reformation Sunday (28Oct18)

Elijah is an Old Testament big wig.

When Jesus hangs out with the superstars of Hebrew Scriptures with a heavenly glimpse in the Transfiguration story, it's Moses and Elijah, representing the categories of law and prophets.

It was feasible Elijah could show up since, instead of dying, a chariot of fire came to scoop him up by the Jordan River and carried him away. From that, our Old Testament ends with the expectation that Elijah will return, which is the famously waiting empty chair at Jewish Passover tables. Also from this, Jesus was asked if he's Elijah, if he's calling for Elijah's help as he died on the cross, and he himself pointed to John the Baptist as the one filling this role of the ultimate prophet.

In a few amazing stories, Elijah called down fire from the sky and had major confrontations with nasty rulers and spoke with God and spoke *for* God and triumphed over 400 bad prophets in a duel.

But for all that large stuff of a big wig, in today's reading, Elijah drops in for his first appearance and seems fairly small and around the fringes.

It helps to know that at the end of the previous chapter, King Ahab had just come to power. He was introduced twice by saying: "Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him" (16:30, 33). Not a glowing endorsement, further accentuated in its dim appraisal by the pacifist activist priest Daniel Berrigan who wrote: "In the tally of royal delinquents, one, Ahab, shines for innovative spoliating wickedness."^{*} He has a way with words! This king, following his forbidden marriage to a foreign wife, Jezebel (a name with demeaning derivation for a shamelessly morally unrestrained woman, as the dictionary would have it), Ahab worsened it by promoting cult worship while ridiculing and killing the good guys.

I mention that because this evil queen Jezebel was from Sidon, where our story spends most of its time today, with a widow. If we have one woman from Sidon who was not commendable, another was. One man of Israel failed to follow God while another listened.

Now, I don't know exactly where you might find yourself in this story, and I'm reluctant to declare any role as yours. You might feel like the one proclaiming God in hostile territory, or akin to one offering what limited care you can. You might even feel like the lifeless son, or wicked rulers. I'm going to try not to assign roles or tell you what you should be doing, but (as usual) to point out what God is doing.

For that uncertainty, we'll notice the start of the story, where God cares for Elijah without human support. God's work *without* our hands. Ravens bring Elijah food. When Elijah does go to a human for assistance, the person is less willing and less able to help than nature was. Besides God's non-human work in creation, we might take that, especially with this Reformation celebration of the church, as an observance that even we who are supposed to be offering care and embodying what God wants still may not be the most willing or helpful. We see where people of the church have not helped things to go right, where it's better apart from us.

That is further highlighted by which human *did* become helpful here: one across the border, outside the realm of God's people, not sharing Elijah's religion, from the place of the evil queen.

This is exactly the offense Jesus is voicing in our Gospel window, that God's preferential treatment and operation isn't reserved for the religious insiders. It doesn't matter if you're a lifelong Lutheran or your perfect attendance awards in worship or how passionately you pray. God will be just as eagerly striving for the life of somebody on the other side of the border, speaking a different language, not sharing your WASP-y privileged presumptuous position. I don't say that for a self-righteous immigration stance, but with the reminder that whenever we

^{*} *The Kings and Their Gods: The Pathology of Power*, p92

draw a line or barrier of righteousness, God will be working on the other side of that line.

This is important for us to see about God's provision. Through this meager outsider, God provided and offered the sustenance to help the prophet's life proceed. But it's more than the physical relief effort. She also offered clarification about God. One commentator points out that "here a foreign woman is a sign to and of God's people." Once more: "a foreign woman [becomes] a sign to and of God's people!"** To know who God is and who we are as God's people, we may not be best served simply by looking at each other, in the obvious places of privilege, in insider mirrors.

Here we may see that benefit of being in this ecumenical partnership as the MCC. We may recognize that advantage in interfaith connections.

And in smaller perspective, it's worth hearing on Reformation Sunday. I can be given to tout my German Lutheran heritage even over against you Scandinavians. I, too, can feel like a good chorale of "A Mighty Fortress" is the voice of our faith, but that it also can go the other direction in our mouths with good beer and some sauerkraut.

So for myself as much as for you, the bulletin cover is a reminder not to be so confined in our sense of who a Lutheran is or what we look like or where we are. Such decolonizing Lutheranism is also why Christa Olson chose the Spanish setting of our liturgy for this service.

For seeing such places of God's work, let's add in the end of the story, moving from food for maintaining life to the interruption of life. Elijah met the widow as she was expecting death from starvation. That was averted, but death returned and took her sick son from her.

And then God's work is still on behalf of life, returning breath into the son and returning him to his mother. This is small work, an isolated case, temporarily helping one family. Elijah will go on to stop the death-wielding forces of his government as he'll struggle for life. The resuscitation of the boy, the restoration of family

in a fringe location, is vital, but is a small hint, a symbol, a mere glimpse of something larger.

Once more, Father Berrigan signals well the ultimate, that this resurrection is "a prelude to a greater wonder, the miracle himself rises from death...And what do we make of that, we who celebrate each year this conquest of the 'last enemy,' denying a last word to the empery of death?" (p95)

That's spot on, but not enough. I'd expand it: we don't only celebrate Jesus' resurrection on Easter each year, but each Sunday, maybe every day, with each moment that we face death large or small. We don't only deny it the last word; we take *its* breath away, denying it any authority over us. Or, *we* don't do it, but God does.

Not by some special power of prophet Elijah did the child have life breathed back into him. This is God's work, always and constantly. Resurrection is on the loose in the world, spreading, expanding the realm of God across borders. We may see God working through nature and through those who don't share our religion, but this is also what keeps us coming back. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." That Christ is risen isn't only for Easter or at funerals, but in baptism, and on Monday, and at a ballot box, and on the news, and in cleaning your room, and for autumn leaves, and on and on.

One bit of that on this Reformation Sunday is to look back at history. We think of Martin Luther, maybe as another Elijah, another John the Baptist, another who pointed a way in the wilderness and named the sin that would try to contradict the Word of God that gives life. We may say that Luther breathed new life into a dying or decrepit church, one in bondage to the ways of the world that draw us from God. But it was not Luther's breath, as he'd quickly remind us. The Holy Spirit did her breathing through him, taking whatever words she could use and filling them with godly inspiration and rejuvenation.

And that is what we continue to celebrate, that in all ways, whether enormously historical or fringe and fleeting, God's Spirit is here, breathing

** Claudia Camp in *Women's Bible Commentary*, p112

new life into you and into our world, reforming us, renewing us, working that miracle in surprising places, like in the face of violently misguided government, in public schools, inside Lutheran churches, and outside the church, in a synagogue community, in food pantries and hospitals, and—maybe most surprising of all—in the obscurest and remotest of places like your life.