

“Foreign Wives and the Fall of Israel”

August 9, 2026

The Reverend Allison R. Smith

Market Square Presbyterian Church

Harrisburg, PA

1 Kings 19:9-18

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

⁹ *At that place he came to a cave and spent the night there.*

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Elijah Meets God at Horeb

¹¹ *He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake, ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." ¹⁵ Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel, and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat*

of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷ Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill, and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸ Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" We should start with this question too if we're to really understand the larger story this little segment comes from. It's a really long story. I actually had an earlier draft of this sermon where I went all the way back to King David to try and explain all the political and religious dynamics that are at play in Elijah's world and how those dynamics have led him to this cave. I had about two pages of that before I decided that maybe—just maybe—I was getting a bit lost in the weeds. But suffice it to say that there is a lot going on in the background of this passage that we miss if we ignore the literary context around it.

1 and 2nd Kings—which in the original Hebrew was actually one book just called Kings—follows the story of Israel from the beginning of King Solomon's reign through the building of the temple, the splitting into the northern and southern kingdoms—Judah in the south and Israel in the north (later a region that will be known as Samaria)—the northern tribes being conquered by Assyria and then the southern kingdom being conquered by Babylon. In large part the story serves both to solidify Hebrew identity and reflect on and explain how the trauma of the period of exile could have been allowed by God to happen. The narrative has social importance, religious significance, and both of those things are deeply intertwined with theology and religious practice.

Elijah says he's been zealous for the Lord and he has. He's been the adversary of Jezebel, that notorious Phoenician princess who is married to the King of the Northern Tribes, King Ahab. She is a devotee of the God Baal, which makes sense as this was the deity of the city of Tyre, where she is from. She brings with her prophets of the God Baal and the goddess Asherah. In an aside, the text mentions that she is hunting down the prophets of the Lord and having them killed.

Meanwhile, there has been a drought for three years which in an agrarian society is an economic as well as an environmental issue. Elijah stages a competition with the prophets of Baal to bring the rain. When the Lord brings rain to end the drought it's especially embarrassing for the prophets of Baal, who is the god of storms, but they're not embarrassed for very long because Elijah promptly slaughters all 450 of them. And that is what he's doing in a cave on Mount Horeb. He's hiding from Jezebel who has sworn to end his life because of his treatment of her prophets.

So we have a political crisis: the division of the Kingdom of Israel from 12 united tribes to two separate Kingdoms both vulnerable to powerful empires like Assyria and eventually Babylon.

We have a religious crisis: they live in a society that is religiously pluralistic. Ahab was not the first King to marry from outside the Kingdom of Israel; Solomon is said to have had many foreign wives and the archaeological record of the region. I'm stepping outside the narrative here and going into the historical world behind the narrative which shows that worshiping both Baal and the Lord was pretty commonplace, though clearly the position of Kings is that that is not ok.

We also have an economic crisis with the drought and there are numerous characters described as suffering from this hardship. And in the midst of all of this social, political, and economic turmoil emerge two zealous religious radicals. Elijah, whose name means something like "The Lord is My God," and Jezebel, which in Hebrew means something like "Baal Exalts." Both are equally devoted to their God; both are willing to kill in the name of their religious identity. And as we read in the final verses of our passage this morning the political violence is going to continue.

I wanted to focus this morning on that sound of sheer silence in which God finds Elijah but try as I might, I couldn't forget those 450 prophets. It's impossible for me to read this passage without the mass killing committed by Elijah lingering in my brain. I want to celebrate God's presence with him, I want to name God's faithfulness and the need for trust as so many commentators do, but in this day and age how can we turn our eyes from this.

We too live in a time of division, a time of economic turmoil which causes many to suffer, of political instability, of fear of the other causing violence from multiple directions. We live in a world of religious pluralism and religious extremism.

So, when I knew I had to bring up the religious violence I wanted Jezebel to emerge as a hero. An innocent victim of sexist slander! Persecuted by Elijah simply for practicing a different religion and being from a different country. But, as I've already shared, she also is guilty of religious violence and mass slaughter.

The text as it comes to us takes a particular theological and political perspective which would have us cheer for Elijah as the hero and celebrate the Lord's supremacy over Baal, and pray for the death of Jezebel, and be resigned to death and the suffering of so many caught in the middle of these forces as inevitable as the divine forces of the universe battle one another. Flipping the script on that and cheering for Jezebel doesn't really change anything. She and Elijah are two sides of the same coin.

What I read in this story is that the fear and hatred of the other only leads to more bloodshed and violence, no matter what "side" you find yourself on. That no matter how tempting it is to make people with practices and beliefs other than our own into demons or caricatures of real human beings, the second we see a human being as nothing more than a "side" we lose our own humanity; it is spiritual death.

There are many who I believe practice our religion wrongly. I'm talking about White Christian Nationalism; that's idol worship if you ask me. When I talk of tolerance, I don't

mean that we should be accepting of any way that people calling themselves Christian use the name Jesus Christ. Standing up for truth and justice is vitally important, but it is equally important to remember that we are all made in the image of God and when we dehumanize each other we lose ourselves.

And when we lose ourselves, we want to see the Lord of the bellowing wind and the earthquake and burning fire come to our "side" but God finds us in the sound of sheer silence, calls us by name, and says "What are you doing here?"

We need to be careful with ourselves in days like these. It's so easy to lose our humanity in opposition to what is wrong that we lose sight of the path of compassion, and love we are called to.

I want you to take stock of yourself

Questions:

Do you carry anger that is helpful, inspiring, and motivating you toward great care? Or are you carrying anger that is destructive, and unhelpful, and eating you from the inside out?

Are you afraid? What is that fear doing inside of you? Does it inspire you to protect the most vulnerable? Or does it cause you to turn inward and away, to shut down and disengage?

Find your stillness, for God comes to us in the sound of sheer silence. God is with us in these times, God is close at hand, not as an excuse to demonize others, but as a guiding light, a moral center, that allows us to see the humanity even in those who have lost themselves. Let us pray!