

## **1 Kings 19:1-4 [5-7] 8-15a**

Last week on my way to church I was listening to NPR, and the show was “Hidden Brain” with Shankar Vedanta. He was interviewing an engineer named Leidy Klotz about Klotz’s theory that often the way to solve a problem is by subtracting something, contrary to our intuition that we should do more or add something. Leidy Klotz recalls that he was struggling in an undergraduate engineering course, honestly thinking he might have to find another major. He’d memorize dozens of facts before each test and then fail the test. Finally he decided that since the next test was centered on the second law of thermodynamics, he’d just know that—and he got the highest score of the class.

Later on, as he and his toddler son were building a bridge out of Duplos, which is apparently what engineers do with Duplos, I don’t know because at my house we were always building random piles of Duplos and claiming they were squirrel trucks, they came to a challenge which he assumed they would surmount by adding more blocks. But when he turned away for a second his son took out a block and solved the problem more elegantly. So he became sort of obsessed with this idea of subtracting, and how it can help us solve complex problems, and also how resistant we just naturally are to subtracting.

I thought that was fascinating—and apparently so did a bunch of other people, because a couple days later I read an article about parenting, and how parents should think about subtracting gizmos or activities instead of adding them. The example was an exhausted parent wondering whether to invest in some gadget that soothes a wakeful baby, and who can blame an exhausted parent for grasping at straws? Not me. But the writer implied that instead something should be eliminated, although they didn’t say what. They also gave the example of

parents who let their children get bored and stay bored until they figure out something to do, rather than supplying them with activities or devices. This is very appealing to me. My first serious cookbook was the *More With Less* cookbook, and I definitely have a bias toward minimalism.

But what, I hear you ask, does this have to do with the prophet Elijah? Much in every way. Immediately preceding the story of Elijah's flight from Jezebel into the wilderness, he had engaged in an *elaborate*, even baroque, contest with the prophets of the Baals. This was addition on steroids. In the midst of a severe drought, he had challenged them to call down fire from heaven on their sacrifice to baal. They had dressed up and chanted and cut themselves till the blood flowed and carried on energetically for some hours, to no effect. Then Elijah had put on a big demonstration. He had the firewood on God's altar soaked in water, which had to be hard to watch with water being as scarce as it was, and then he called down fire from heaven and it came. God lit Elijah's fire even on wet wood, and then Elijah slew ALL the prophets of the baals, and God made it rain.

It was a big production, no expense or effort spared, a huge and decisive win for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And immediately afterward Ahab's queen, the one who had brought the baals, sent word to Elijah that she was coming for him. And Elijah subtracted. He subtracted himself right out of there, left his servant behind, and went a day's journey into the wilderness, where he tried to resign from God's employ. "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." God gave him two meals and otherwise left him alone, and Elijah went farther away, to a cave on the mountain of Horeb where Moses had encountered God in blinding splendor.

Blinding splendor is not how Elijah encountered God. In three dramatic events, a great wind, an earthquake, and a fire, God was not present. It was in the sound of sheer silence that Elijah perceived God and made his complaint. "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."

It's fascinating, how we associate divinity with monumentalism and material splendor. The earliest known temple, which is in Turkey, is now just a pile of gigantic stones, but we know that it was a temple because what else could be the motivation for people to cooperate in hewing and moving enormous heavy stones and piling them on top of each other? You don't need that for a market, which is another early reason people might gather in number. You need it to build a temple for a god who deserves awesome splendor.

When European fur traders came to North America, even before there were attempts at appropriating the land, the fur traders impressed the indigenous people by offering in trade some really impressive material artifacts. They had metal pots and metal knives, which lasted longer than the ones you make yourself, and the knives held their edge better. The local people assumed, very naturally, that if the Europeans' material culture was desirable, they must also worship a more powerful and effective god. And so, without any intentional missionizing, cracks appeared in the indigenous spiritualities that would eventually render them almost extinct. Because of the assumption that divinity is associated with impressive physical manifestation.

Elijah had traded on that very association in his face-off with the Baals. But I have to say, when Josh and I read that story, he did not find it particularly impressive or inspiring. It

didn't surprise him; he was familiar with several stories in which God seems disproportionately harsh or punitive. But as we discussed it, he was skeptical that it was a very accurate or revelatory depiction of God. God just seemed like a bully, and we know God is not a bully. No question Elijah's display was impressive, but it did not speak to us of God.

Shankar Vedanta also has a feature called "Unsung Hero," in which people tell short anecdotes about someone who made a difference to them. In one recent episode, a woman named Betsy Cox tells of being a new mother without much money, living in a cold apartment. On the first really cold day, she strapped her baby into his pack and went to Walmart to buy a space heater. But they were all out. She felt dejected and overwhelmed and just like nothing ever works. As she looked at something else in another aisle, an older man with a southern accent came up to her and said what a beautiful baby she had, and could he see him? Then he called his wife over, and they admired the baby together—"look at those beautiful blue eyes"--, and the man said, "You've been blessed, darlin'." Then they moved on, and after a minute she went to find them, but they had vanished. They had vanished, but Betsy Cox felt blessed.

In the cleaning aisle of Walmart, a stranger's kindness changed her day and, since the incident has stayed with her, her life. In a cave on Mt. Horeb, when all the grand and impressive commotion had died away, Elijah encountered God. God stayed silent and zipped it so Elijah could lament. God did not smite Elijah for complaining, or remind him of that really cool day he'd sent fire from heaven. God just shut up and listened, and then said, Now I have something very different for you to do, and you don't have to do it alone.

The big demonstration of God's power over against that of baal was certainly impressive, even to a fault. But the story is not moving or compelling. It just isn't. The story

about God showing up in silence and listening until Elijah has finished, that's compelling. That speaks volumes about God's respect for Elijah's anguish and Elijah's ability to go on. And the fact that twice food appeared there in the wilderness—a cake baked on hot rocks—also makes me wonder if there was an unsung hero in the vicinity of the broom tree where Elijah had taken refuge. Maybe it was an angel, maybe it was the Walmart man's great-great-great grandma. But in the empty space in time left after the showdown with the prophets of baal, what showed up was kindness. And that kindness is what sustained God's prophet to go on.

Let us pray:

God of small things and absences, we are drawn to what is impressive and dominant, and we often underestimate what you can do with our limited abilities. Let us be unsung heroes, however overwhelming the forces are that are arrayed against abundant life. In the void, may we find your presence. Amen.