

June 19, 2022
"Choosing Otherwise"
1 Kings 19:1-16 / Galatians 3:26-29
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I think I know how Elijah feels. I suspect we all know to some extent, especially now. Despite his recent success on Mt. Carmel, where he publicly exposed as completely ineffective the prophets of Ba'al whose prayers failed to set ablaze a sacrificial altar, while Elijah's prayers to the God of the covenant not only set ablaze an altar, but an altar drenched in water. Despite that success—and let me explain here that the real conflict in this and other biblical stories involving idols is not the competition between two religions, but rather the clashing between two different visions of life and life together; on one hand, Ba'al and other idols who blessed the world as it is, who called for acceptance of, compliance with, the world as it is, with the vast majority existing only to serve the wealth and luxury of the very and predatory few; on the other hand, the God of the covenant who envisions justice, a fair sharing among all, who calls for enactment of otherwise.

Despite Elijah's success for the God of the covenant, for otherwise, he now runs in despair, his life sought by the royal couple, King Ahaz and Queen Jezebel; he falls in the wilderness, wanting to die, and though fed by an angel enough to go on to a cave in a mountain, there he wails that he alone is left, his life forfeited of meaning, it's all been for naught—all his faithfulness, all his effort, even his success, has meant nothing—nothing has changed, nothing *will* change, nothing *will* change. That is despair, and I think I know how Elijah feels; I suspect we all do, especially now.

Despite years of agitation and advocacy and prayer, of marches and vigils and votes and witnesses, there is still Buffalo and Uvalde and Tulsa and here in Philly, South Street, not to mention the daily routine of gun violence here and, still, the inestimable toll of trauma and grief following it. Despite the Civil Rights

movement and decades of struggle to empower Black voices, culminating in our first Black president, the backlash that elected a bigot, and now, with gerrymandering and election restrictions, the silencing begins again. Despite a decades-long movement to empower women and give them say, in our life together, over their own bodies especially, the Supreme Court now stands poised to take that say away. Despite years of building interfaith relationships, of exploring together our mutual roles in the common good, one party's candidate for governor in our state is a white Christian nationalist, one who thinks women's choice is nonsense, who wants to lessen gun violence by increasing guns, especially among teachers in our schools, who claims that all he does is led by God. Despite years of prayer and study and recycling and building public awareness, devastating planetary crisis looms, with carbon-dioxide levels the highest on earth in millions of years, with one in six deaths globally due to pollution (according to the Global Alliance on Health and Pollution), with more erratic weather conditions, wilder and wilder storms and floods and fires each season. Our home is collapsing.

Has all our faithfulness, all our effort, all our pushing and prodding and praying and parading, all our speaking and giving and doing, even our successes, has it all meant nothing? Has nothing changed? *Will* nothing change?

That's Elijah's question, although for him the question has shaded into statement; the wrestling has become despair. Nothing *will* change. All hope is gone ...

Which is always the temptation, to resign ourselves to a future that is simply a repetition of the present, of the *worst* of the present, to accept as fate the brokenness of now and our helplessness before it, to relinquish faith as faith has always been, the conviction of new possibility, being grasped by an alternative future, being chosen by otherwise. The temptation is always despair, to accept our inability to enact anything different. That's what Elijah does, and so he must remember.

Standing at the edge of the cave, he longs for God but does not find God in wind or earthquake or fire. He longs for God and is greeted only by silence; there is no rescue, no God swooping in to save, only silence, sheer silence.

But in that silence something happens, something holy. There where there is nothing more to hear, there where there is nothing to distract, there where there is nothing left but what stirs within, something stirs in Elijah, and Elijah begins to remember. Elijah begins to conceive a crack in the hard wall of despair that surrounds him, begins to glimpse possibility. Elijah begins to remember an alternative vision of life and to be grasped by it. Elijah begins to remember that he is called by it and chooses, chooses, to go, to do otherwise.

For him that choice is dangerous, seditious; he goes to anoint alternative kings over Aram and Israel, in other words, to foment insurrection. But despite the risk, he chooses otherwise and goes to enact it, which is the only way to end despair: to chose and to do otherwise.

Elijah remembered who he was, what grasped him, what called him, and he chose once again to seek it, chose to do, to enact, otherwise. Elijah remembered, and we need to remember too. We need to remember our heritage, the ground on which we stand. Significant research into the followers of Jesus during the first two hundred years has found their beliefs were all over the place, no single belief in common, no single belief. It's found their practices were all over the place, none in common, except, except one, one practice that all shared—a regular common meal where all were welcome, all had voice, and all were equal. We see that reflected in the passage from Galatians today containing one of the earliest statements of belief we know of, prior to Paul, within 15 years of Jesus: "There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ."

In an empire of deep divisions and clear rankings, of some who mattered and most who didn't, they chose otherwise—no divisions, no rankings, all matter—and they enacted it regularly in a meal.

That is our heritage, and we must remember, remember our identify as those carrying a different vision of life, as those made for an alternative future, as those grasped by a different world, a world of belonging, of well-being, for all. We must remember and choose otherwise, do otherwise.

Amidst an onslaught of gun violence, amidst an assault on the voices and bodies of women and people of color, in the face of the toxic masculinity of white Christian nationalism, facing the careening toward collapse of our planetary home, we must remember and chose otherwise, do otherwise. It's the only way to end despair.

We must remember, which you do already, like the early Jesus groups, when you gather to hold each other, to engage in mutual concern, to sing life's beauty and bewail its brokenness, to belong to each other across all your differences. You already enact otherwise.

But how else? Together? Apart, each of you? How do you choose otherwise; how do you do otherwise? By voting? By calling your congresspeople and city councilmembers? By showing up at their offices? By marching? By loving your neighbor, every neighbor? By bussing to the capital and raising your voice? By writing letters? By teaching? By writing a song? By persisting, persisting, persisting in pressing for justice?

How do you choose otherwise, do otherwise, enact otherwise?

It's the only way end despair, to choose otherwise, to do otherwise. It's who you are, who we are called to be. So remember. Remember. Remember ... and choose otherwise, do hope.