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**Title:** Beach Reads Elijah: Whisper in Silence

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**Scripture:** [1 Kings 19](#), [James 5:17](#)

**Text:** [1 Kings 19:1-3a](#), [11-15a](#)

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She isn't nice. We can all agree on this. If Ahab is the baddest of bad kings, Jezebel is in good company. She has the reputation as being the baddest woman of all of the bad women in scripture because nothing written about her is redemptive. She kicks off the third chapter of our Bible beach read, speaks for the first time and she

uncovers the weaknesses of our hero, Elijah. His weakness? "Elijah was a person just like us" (James 5:17a)

If you are just joining in, that was our starting place. Elijah, "a person just like us" shows up at King Ahab's palace in Samaria. He pronounces a drought, confronting Ahab and his adulterous queen Jezebel, with unfaithfulness. Their accused adultery was not with individuals, but other gods, specifically, the Phoenician gods of Baal and Asherah. Jezebel did not appreciate the accusation. There is a good reason.

Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal of Tyre, the king of the Phoenicians, whose ancestors were the Canaanites. They had a sophisticated maritime trade on the Mediterranean coast of Tyre and Sidon. They worshipped a bunch of gods with Baal being the primary fertility and agricultural god. Jezebel's father was a high priest to Baal and there is good reason to believe that Jezebel also served as priestess while in her native land. <sup>1</sup>

When Jezebel marries Ahab, a smart political and economic marriage that solidified Israel's alliance with Sidon, she brings her foreign god of Baal with her. She was, after all, raised to honor him. Likely, Jezebel did not believe that she was adulterous, rather, she was faithful. Ahab believed in the old adage. Happy wife, happy life. So, Ahab "...set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria." (1 Kings 16:31). This aroused Yahweh's anger and the pronouncement of a drought by Elijah.<sup>2</sup>

You can see why Jezebel might think her reputation as unfaithful is underserved. Her loyalties lie with Baal and her Phoenician culture, not with

Yahweh and Israel. If you see this, you might also see that her intention to murder Elijah is unfounded. This reputation comes when she learns of Elijah's victory on Mt. Carmel.

It comes after a season of preparation during which God works in Elijah so that God can work through him. Elijah emerges spiritually empowered, ready for a contest between Yahweh and Baal. Whichever god can light a sacrificial altar first, wins. Elijah knows Baal prophets will fail and he alone will call down fire from heaven. He arrogantly trash talks Jezebel's prophets, saying their bull smells and promising to kick their altars. His confidence is incredible given that he stands alone before 850 opponents.

Late in the day, when Baal's prophets fizzle, Elijah brings the sizzle. He calls his shot and fire comes crashing down from heaven consuming the altar and the bull on it. Elijah then sentences Jezebel's prophets to death. Finally, as if to demonstrate his spiritual power is also physical, Elijah takes a victory lap. He one-ups Ahab by outrunning his chariot back to Jezreel. Like Rocky Balboa dancing on the step of the Philadelphia museum, he is a powerful champion, arms raised high in victory until he's not.

Ahab reports to Jezebel the events of Mt. Carmel, how he'd destroyed the altars of Baal, and put her prophets to the sword. She considers this and, "Then Jezebel sends a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." (1 Kings 19:2) In other words, "May the gods take my life if I have not taken yours by this time tomorrow."

Was she serious? If so, why the warning? Why not send the assassin straight out? If she wanted to kill Elijah, she would have sent a killer, not a messenger. Jezebel has the reputation as a scorned queen with murderous intent, but more likely, she was a clever politician who knows how to get her opponent out of the way. She has a good read on human nature.<sup>3</sup> Since Elijah was a person just like us, Jezebel knows that a threat alone was enough to send him packing.

The champion who ran in victory, runs again, now afraid for his life. He does not wait for instructions from Yahweh who has already protected him from danger nor does he defiantly face Jezebel in the same way he faced Ahab earlier. He doesn't trust God to protect him even after his remarkable achievement. Jezebel had him rightly figured.<sup>4</sup>

He flees Israel altogether, runs to Beersheba, one hundred miles away. Jezebel got him out of the country. He is deep within the kingdom of Judah, south of Jerusalem. At Beersheba, he leaves his servant and goes on alone

another day into the desert. Worn out by his flight, and tortured by hunger and thirst, he falls by a broom tree and asks to die. "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." (1 Kings 19:4) Elijah is burned out and depressed. How did this happen?

Long before psychotherapists identified the stages, Elijah lived them. He wrote the book. He was worn-out from three and a half years of praying for a drought, doing battle against the prophets of Baal, and then running a celebratory marathon to flaunt his victory. He withdrew from the community, leaving his companion and servant in Beersheba. He focuses on the threat that Jezebel makes. Most of all, Elijah forgets the incredible blessings he has received from God, the supernatural protection and provision, from food and water to the power to raise a child from the dead and call down fire from heaven.

Do you want to get depressed? Elijah has the recipe. Wear yourself out, shut others out, obsess about what might happen, and forget God's faithfulness. Exhausted, alone, worried and helpless, he falls asleep. During his sleep, God sends a message to Elijah. An angel touches him and says, "Get up and eat." Good advice to someone who is withdrawn and depressed. Eat and rest and this is exactly what Elijah does. He goes back to sleep but he is awakened by the angel again.

"It's time to eat again."

"What? I was sleeping."

"Not now. You've got to eat because you have a long trip to take."

"What?"

"Yes, if you don't eat the journey will be too much for you."

"Where am I going?"

"The sacred mountain where God spoke to Moses, so get up Elijah, eat, drink, and go." "He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God." (1 Kings 19:8) That's a long walk, a pilgrimage, one where he might reconnect and renew. But we discover he is still in a bad place.

Upon arriving at Horeb, he climbs the mountain, finds a cave and spends the night there. He is hiding, both physically and spiritually. God will have none of it. "The Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'"

Elijah whines his answer. "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." (1 Kings 19:10) Really? You are on the holy mountain of God, the very place where Moses received the Law, and you throw a pity party in front of God?

"I'm the only one who cares; everyone else is against you. I'm all alone and that nasty queen wants to take my life." He doesn't say it once. He says it twice. Elijah needs a reality check about who he is talking too. He is about to be gobsmailed into a new understanding of God's omnipotence. It starts as is always does with that the special word between Elijah and God. Go. "Go out and stand on the mountain before me. I'm going to pass by." He does. He might be a depressed whiner whose memory is clouded because he still remembers the word "go"

On the mountain Elijah experiences, the pyrotechnics Moses experienced. God was getting Elijah's attention. "Lightning flashed, and after that, a wind came up that almost blew Elijah off his feet, and after that, the earth gave such a shake that it almost knocked him silly. But there wasn't so much as a peep out of Yahweh."<sup>5</sup> Elijah stood there, eyes wide open, waiting to see the Lord. But God wasn't in the lightning or the wind or the earthquake or even the rocks breaking all around him.

"Only when the fireworks were finished and a terrible hush fell over the mountain did Elijah hear something, and what he heard was so much like silence that it was only through the ear of faith that he knew it was Yahweh."<sup>6</sup> Like Moses whose face so radiated the light of God that he wore a mask, Elijah wraps his face with his mantle. In that sound of nothing, he heard a still small voice, whispered in silence "Go."

"Elijah, what are you doing here? Go. Go back to Israel and anoint a new king. Do the same while you are passing through Judah. What is all this about you being alone? You never were. I was with you. But there are also seven thousand in Israel who haven't bowed their knee to Baal. So don't think you are alone. I think you should have an understudy to mentor. He's an Eli too. Elisha. So go find him. So what are you waiting for? "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus" (1 Kings 19: 15b) Go. Get busy. There is much yet to do."

This is exactly what he does. It was a long trip home, at least forty days and nights, probably much longer. As he made his way back, Elijah realized that even though the message was whispered in the silence, it came through loud and clear. There was no longer any question who had been victorious

on Mt. Carmel or for that matter, who raised a child, fed Elijah and the widow, or turned off and on the rain. It wasn't him, it was God.

Elijah finds Elisha plowing in a field. His call is simple. He throws his mantle over him. Maybe Elisha could smell the ozone of lightning on it or perhaps the cordite of the fireworks. Or maybe, just maybe, there was the sweet smell of God's whisper: "go." He responds. He too goes; "...he set out and followed Elijah and became his servant." (1 Kings 19:21c)

Elijah is not alone. On the sacred mountain, he learned he never was. He discovered that sometimes when we are lowest, God seems to speak the softest, seems to whisper in the silence. Elijah needed that reminder because he was a person just like us, which means we need that reminder too.

May I offer it to you? Listen. Listen to silence with the ear of faith. Listen carefully enough and you can hear "I'm here. I'm with you. I'll never leave you. You're not alone. I am enough." For Elijah it was. Pray it is for us as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Crowell, Bradley L. "Good Girl, Bad Girl: Foreign Women of the Deuteronomistic History in Postcolonial Perspective." *Biblical Interpretation* 21, no. 1 (2013): 1–18.

<sup>2</sup> Merez, R. J. (2009). Jezebel's oath (1 Kgs 19,2). *Biblica*, 90(2), 257–259.

<sup>3</sup> Merez.

<sup>4</sup> Hadjiev, T. (2015). Elijah's alleged megalomania: reading strategies for composite texts, with 1 Kings 19 as an example. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 39(4), 433–4

<sup>5</sup> Buechner, Frederick. Elijah. From Peculiar Treasures and later, Beyond Words. Retrieved at <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/10/21/elijah>.

<sup>6</sup> Buechner.