

The Gift in this Moment is . . .

I Kings 19:1-16

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About halfway between New Orleans and Shreveport, fronting Interstate 49 as it begins its long ascent to the north, sets Prejeans, one of the greatest restaurants in the United States. If you are ever lucky enough to travel that way, you should stop in and eat. Don't get distracted by the crawfish etouffee, eggplant pirogue, crab corn bisque or shrimp poboy. Order the gumbo. Splurge and get the bowl, not the cup.

I believe they will serve it in heaven. Its so good, I almost applied for a job at the Exxon station in Lafayette so I could be close enough to eat it more often. I can't tell you how to make it, but I can tell you how to ruin it. The delicacy takes hours of culinary expertise to make the stock, stir the roux, mix the spices, brown the meat, cook down the vegetables and reduce the liquid until perfection results; however, it only takes ten seconds to destroy it. Simply take a big glass of water, and dilute it.

Anything diluted, isn't much good. Take your favorite cup of coffee, brewed just the way you like it, pour in a matching cup of water and pitch it down the sink. Fill a gas container with one gallon of gasoline, add another gallon of water and pump into your car. Get back to me on how that works for you. Watered-down friendship is useless. Lukewarm love is an irritation. Pale, thin faith is powerless.

In the days of Elijah the prophet, the people of Israel diluted their devotion to God. They did not reject God out right; they blended worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with the various nature religions promoted by their neighbors. The amalgamation was an insult to God. Imagine how you would feel if your spouse said, "Honey, I love you. Of course I love all these other partners too." Most of us would find such a claim revolting. The prophet said so did God.

Elijah told the people that their diluted faith caused them to limp through life. He challenged them to decide which God they wanted to worship and commit whole-heartedly to that deity.

The people ignored Elijah's call so the brave prophet devised a showdown between the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the nature gods of Baal and Asherah. Two bulls were sacrificed and laid upon altars. The prophets of Baal, numbering more than 400 men, gathered around their bull. Elijah alone stood by the sacrifice to God. According to the plan, the prophets of Baal were to call out for their God to send fire to burn up their sacrifice and Elijah was to do the same. Whichever God responded would be embraced by the people of Israel, the non-responsive deity would be abandoned.

Baal's prophets went first. For hours, they begged their god to send fire from above. The Bible says, "there was no voice, no answer." In rising desperation, the prophets cut themselves with knives and swords to demonstrate the seriousness of their petitions. Once again, the Scripture reports, "there was no voice, no answer, no response." Exhausted, the followers of Baal finally give up and Elijah approaches the altar of the living God.

Before he prays, Elijah pours buckets of water over his sacrifice until the carcass of the bull is dripping with water and the trench around the sacrifice is swirling with the clear liquid. Then, he asks God to respond and I Kings testifies that in the next heartbeat, God sends a fire so hot, it incinerates the bull, the wood, the altar, the stones, the dust and evaporates all the water.

The people of Israel repent of their diluted faith and vow anew to follow God alone. Elijah chases the prophets of Baal down to the river and kills all of them. Game, set, match. Case closed. Victory secured. Revival completed.

Elijah should have been ecstatic. The watered-down faith of his people was replaced with new zeal for the Lord. If that had been the outcome he was seeking, Elijah would have been jumping for joy, but that was not the gift he sought.

The powerful prophet wanted Ahab and Jezebel, the King and Queen of Israel and the wickedest couple in the Old Testament, to bow down in repentance before God Almighty. He assumed that even folks as perverted as Ahab and Jezebel would have to confess the error of their ways in the aftermath of such a spectacular demonstration of God's power and he wanted to see their humiliation and remorse for himself. So, when Ahab wheeled off in his chariot to tell Jezebel about God's victory, Elijah took off on foot with the same destination.

Elijah was so eager to see the King and Queen prostrate themselves before God, he outran Ahab's chariot and secured a perfect view of the Kings conversation with the Queen. Standing with his hands on his hips, panting for breath, reading the King's lips, Elijah must have thought, "this is the moment I've been waiting for." Beaming, he watched as the Queen summonsed a messenger, spoke a few words in his ear and sent him running toward the prophet. Expecting the best news of his ministerial career, Elijah welcomed the messenger and encouraged him to speak. Elijah's grin, however, quickly changed into a scowl. Jezebel had not sent a message of repentance and remorse, she had issued a death warrant for the prophet.

Listen to how the Bible describes Jezebel's reaction and Elijah's subsequent response.

The same man who was willing to face down four hundred prophets, now runs for his life. Hours before, he stood his ground in the face of a whole community who sided with his enemies, now he slides down in front of a pathetic broom tree in the wilderness and asks God to let him die.

As he lies there, the exhausted prophet falls asleep. In the midst of his rest, an angel awakens him and tells him to drink the water and eat the food provided by the messenger. Elijah obeys and then falls back into a deep sleep. After another season of rest, the angel again taps him on the shoulder and replenishes his strength with more food and water. Once refreshed, Elijah continues his journey until he arrives at a cave at the foot of Mount Horeb, the same location where Moses bumped into the burning bush, and the pilgrim lies down for another good night's sleep.

The next morning, the Lord asks Elijah why he is hiding out in a cave. Bitterly, the man of God says, "because I have done everything you asked of me and you still didn't give me the gift I sought. Not only did the King and Queen not repent, they have put a contract out on my life."

If we are honest about our own lives, we need to tell Elijah to scoot over and make room for us in that cave. Most of us have a sentence that goes like this: "I did what you asked Lord, I followed the rules like the church taught, I practiced what the preacher preached and I still didn't get what I requested. My child didn't straighten up. The cancer didn't go away. My husband didn't quit drinking. My boss didn't save my job. The depression still hasn't lifted. I never found a spouse. The teaching position never came my way. I never caught up with my mortgage payments and they took my home. My sister and I were never reconciled."

Like Elijah, while we focus on what God did not do for us, the Lord quietly feeds us, shelters us, comforts us, heals us, teaches us, guides us and speaks to us. We keep on grumbling about the gift we did not receive and miss the gifts God supplies. This morning I've asked a few people who have recently been through such experiences, to talk about the gift they asked God for and the gift God provided instead. Marsha, Craig and Bobbie are not speaking this morning because they are different from you and me. They are sharing their experiences because we all have so much in common.

Much has been said since Senator Kennedy's death about the fact that he never achieved his life time goal of becoming president. Yet, the pundits have all observed, the legacy of his life, the mountain of legislation produced, may leave a more profound effect on the country than any presidential action in history. Senator Kennedy never received the gift he most wanted and yet his life was filled with gifts all the same. This understanding, however, has only arisen as people have looked back on the man's life from the perspective of almost fifty years of public service.

It usually takes a little time before we see the gifts God gave us while we were longing for something else. In some cases, it takes a lot of time before we are able to see the blessing in the time of trial. The Bible says Elijah journeyed forty days and forty nights before he came to rest in the cave. Even after more than a month of pouting, he remained disgruntled with God. Patiently, the Lord spoke to him once more, hoping to help him see the gifts God had provided. Listen to Elijah's next encounter with God as I read I Kings 19:11-16.

The Lord calls him out on the ledge of the mountain and sends him three powerful experiences. A gale-force wind passes, followed by an earthquake and then a silence in which the whisper of the Lord is heard. Once again God asks Elijah why he is hiding out in the wilderness and for the second time the prophet replies, "I've done everything you asked of me and you still didn't grant the gift I requested. The King and Queen have not relented, they want me dead."

Can you imagine participating in such a conversation with God and continuing to complain? The wind pounds the rocks into gravel, the earthquake makes the mountain tremble, the sheer silence gives birth to the very voice of God and yet the prophet digs his heels into his hiding place and tells the Creator of the Universe, "I'm not leaving and I'm not going back to work for you."

Without any noticeable sign of frustration, the Lord ignores Elijah's blindness and says, "Well whether you see the gifts I'm giving you or not, its time to get back to work. You've got to leave this wilderness and anoint a new king in Aram and a new king in Israel. When you finish that, I want you to ordain your successor, the young man called Elisha. He will become a prophet in your place. And by the way, I have at least seven thousand followers in Israel alone, who, like you, have not abandoned me."

One of the reasons I love this story is because there is no happy ending. Elijah doesn't have an epiphany and say to God, "now I see the wonderful gifts you were giving me all along and I serve you gladly." In many ways he is as stubborn as Jezebel. The Lord, however, doesn't give in to his darkness. He showers additional gifts on Elijah, knowing he won't see them either. "I've got some good work for you to do Elijah and I'll protect you while you do it. I've made plans for your retirement and your homecoming and in due time, that too will come to pass. And, even though you don't see them, I've got a whole community of believers who can be a source of support to you. Leave this ridiculous hide-out and get back to work."

When we can't get the gift we want, its time to ask God to help us see the gifts we have. Maybe our life has not turned out the way we hoped. Maybe we've less success that we dreamed, less money than we planned, a messier family than we hoped, more health problems than we expected and more struggles than we think is fair. Like Elijah, we can stubbornly complain about the gifts not given to us, but if we make that choice, life will be oppressive.

The better choice is to accept what has and has not happened in life and look for the blessings hidden therein: rest, shelter, food, drink, work, community, support, maturity, wisdom, freedom, consolation and the companionship of the God who made us. The gift of this moment is . . . fill in the blank and thank the Lord.