

OUT OF CONTEXT - HISTORICAL CONTEXT  
A SERMON BASED ON 1 KINGS 19:9-16  
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO  
SUNDAY, JUNE 23, 2019  
10:00 a.m.

When I was doing my undergraduate degree,

I thought it might be fun

to take as my elective, church history.

I didn't need to take it at that point.

I was a psychology major.

Taking a church history elective

could be interesting

and give me a sense of whether further study

in the things of faith and church

would be something that would suit me

as I was considering ministry.

It was an elective.

I was expecting to handle it like an audited course.

Read a bit, bang out a quick paper or two,

treat it like a tasting or a flight, a little here, a little there.

It turned out to be the toughest course of my entire university career,  
toughest in the best sense of the word.

There were 60 of us in the first class.

There were only 25 in the second class.

35 people dropped it after they saw the reading list.

Twelve of us finished the course.

I hunted down my professor on 'ratemyprofessors.com' and sure enough,  
there he was.

“This class is one of the most challenging history courses at York,  
in terms of readings.

Next review,

“This is probably the hardest class I ever hard... (yes  
that is what was typed)

way too much readings and spent a lot of money on books

I never even read.

“way too much work and readings. Helpful, but extremely hard.”

It was worth it.

My take away lesson from this professor,

was his insistence, in the study of history  
dates matter and place matters, to the point of being essential.  
He insisted that without date and and without place,  
you couldn't find the spot in the story,  
and if you didn't know the spot in the story,  
well then you weren't going to understand the story.

It was pushback against the temptation to write generically about  
broad themes, trends, patterns without specifics.

For example if I said German reunification happened in the 90's,  
that would be true.

But if I told you that it was on November 9, 1989 the wall came down  
in Berlin.

And that reunification was October 3, 1990,  
there starts to be a fuller picture.

If I mentioned that the Tianamen Square protests happened in Beijing  
in June of 1989, that says something.

If I add that Poland formally restored democracy in December of 1989.

You start to understand why place and dates are important.

So when you wrote an essay in this professor's class,

you couldn't bluff your way through with general historical themes.

If you couldn't locate the place, or the date, you were done.

But then really, if you took the time to learn the place and the date,  
the story and theme almost wrote itself.

I tell you all this to explain today's type of context we are looking at

as we consider reading your Bible and learning the Bible.

The first week we looked at the Bible in today's context.

Last week we looked at cultural context within the text,

and how that impacted meaning.

This week we look at historical context and how that impacts meaning.

When reading the Bible,

you also need historical context to help you understand the story.

Elijah was a prophet in the northern part

of the what had become the divided nation of Israel.

It was 850 BC and Ahab was king of the northern kingdom.

More than a man of faith, Ahab was a pragmatist,  
which really means having faith in yourself.

In this newly separated kingdom,

Ahab built a new capital city in Samaria, his very own capital.

He got to work making alliances with other small nations.

He did what he could to prop up a failing economy,

and to keep the threat of Assyrian invasion,

pushed back.

His seized his greatest opportunity.

He married - for expediency – for political gain.

Jezebel was the daughter of the Phoenician king,

the strong, wealthy nation to the northeast, today's Lebanon

Things were good in Phoenicia.

With Jezebel came a mighty dowry.

She brought new trade agreements,

new ports on the Mediterranean Sea,

political security,

but she also brought her fanatical devotion,

to the Phoenician god Baal.”

Ahab was a pragmatist.

Bowing his knee to Baal, instead of to Yahweh,

turning his back on the Lord,

he could keep his wife happy,

provide for his nation,

standing behind the front line of Phoenicians,

they could shield themselves from the Assyrians,

and he'd have the money to build himself a new palace

in the new capital city in the deal.

Not bad.

Earlier in 1 Kings we are told,

‘Ahab began to serve Baal and worship him.

He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal

that he built in Samaria.

Ahab also made an Asherah pole

and did more to provoke Yahweh, the God of Israel to anger,

than did all the kings of Israel before him.’

Ahab ditched God. Really bad.

More than a man of faith, Ahab was a pragmatist.

The Phoenicians were doing better with Baal,  
than the Israelites were doing with Yahweh anyway.

This is the historical context into which the prophet Elijah  
was called to serve.

The prophet Elijah was the uninvited preacher,  
who spoke for the jilted Yahweh.

His was a voice no one wanted to hear.

Annoyed by his continual rantings about Yahweh,  
and loyal to Baal  
Jezebel had a price out on Elijah's head,  
a price high enough that Elijah was a very profitable target,

Elijah had been in hiding for years until just before today's text.

God had called Elijah to the mountaintop,  
to face Ahab with a direct challenge.

It would be Baal vs. Yahweh.

Baal's 450 state-funded ministers of religion

vs. Yahweh's solo, back-packing, wilderness prophet.

The contest was to determine whose god was real,

whose god was effective, powerful.

Whose god would make a difference, act, bring change.

Two altars were set up atop Mt. Carmel.

Bulls of sacrifice were prepared.

The gods would be called upon to start the fire.

The god who successfully started the fire on the altar  
would be the winner.

After a whole day of Baal's prophets doing their best, nothing happened.

Then it was Elijah's turn.

He prayed a simple prayer,

'O Yahweh, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel,

let it be known today that you are God in Israel,

and that I am your servant,

and have done all these things at your command.



Answer me O Lord, answer me,  
so that these people will know that you Yahweh,  
are turning their hearts back to you again.'

God answered with clarity.

The fire that fell down burned up the sacrifice,  
the wood,  
the stones,  
the soil,  
and the water in the trench.

The people immediately dropped to their knees, bowed,  
declared Yahweh the winner, their God.

The prophets of Baal were seized and slaughtered.

Elijah had a mountaintop experience.

Surely he could now consider himself a successful prophet of God.

No more hiding in the wilderness.

No more bounty on his head.

There would be no doubt about who was God now.

Surely Israel would belong to God now.

Having seen this,

Ahab's pragmatism would surely lead him back to Yahweh.

In his success,

Elijah came down the mountain running,

running toward success, new skills, new responsibilities, new roles,

new ways of thinking, new challenges, new perspective,

He did a three quarters marathon and beat Ahab and his chariot

to the city of Jezreel, to Ahab's palace.

Jezebel was waiting for him.

Rather than being impressed by Yahweh's victory,

rather than change her allegiance and follow Israel's god,

Queen Jezebel was furious.

She threatened to have him killed within twenty-four hours

if she found him.

Elijah had to keep running.

His success as a prophet didn't mean rest.

Just more running.

He ran back out to the desert where he collapsed,  
under a broom tree,  
which looks a lot like a tumbleweed,  
and there,  
exhausted,  
decided he was done.

“I have had enough God.

Take my life.

I’m no better at this than my ancestors.”

Barbara Brown Taylor explores Elijah’s depression.

“Sometimes, when you get exactly what you want,  
there can be a terrible vacuum afterwards.

All the energy you counted on to reach your goal  
suddenly deserts you  
and you do not have a clue  
what you are supposed to do next.

You felt so strong going up the mountain.

Now you don't know if your knees will hold you up  
on the way back down.

Mount Carmel and the battle against Baal looked like the finish line.

A win against 450 to 1 odds.

It was a mountaintop experience.

However if you are on the wrong mountain,  
you could all too easily find,  
that what was supposed to be a finish line,  
was simply the end of the starting lap,  
where the race is just getting going  
just when you think you've already given it your all.

You need to choose your mountain carefully.

Elijah was done.

Exhausted. Spent. Discouraged.

He had had enough.

Fortunately for Elijah, fortunately for us,

God is not a pragmatist.

He stayed with his man down.

Allowed him to rest.

Made him take something to eat and drink,

let him rest some more.

Then God assigned him a new address.

A new place.

Another mountain to climb.

A place significant because of its historical context.

Elijah took the common biblical prescription for time apart.

Elijah took his 40 days and 40 nights and headed through desert,

to Mount Horeb.

You know it better as Mount Sinai.

It is the same mountain

where God spoke to Moses from the burning bush.

The mountain where Moses received the 10 commandments.

The mountain where the people of Israel heard God speak.

The mountain at which God passed by Moses,

and told Moses his name.

It is the mountain from which Moses descended,

his face aglow from meeting with God.

It is a famous address, albeit difficult to get to.

After 40 days, still tired, still depressed and angry,

Elijah showed up at God's address, God's place,

and promptly locked himself in the metaphorical bathroom.

He went into the cave.

One writer describes Elijah as being in a 'cave mood.'

He still wasn't too pleased with how things had worked out.

God called through the door,

'What are you doing here Elijah?'

You can hear his anger, displeasure, dissatisfaction,

accusation, frustration in Elijah's answer.

"I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty.

The Israelites have rejected your covenant,

torn down your altars,

and put your prophets to death with the sword.

I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.'

And at times we think we'd like nothing better,

than for God to just leave us alone.

Living, working, believing in you is not going as I'd expected

Just leave me alone God.

And we hope that God will just go away.

Leave us in our cave.

Where alone, unbothered, with no demands and no people,

an island unto ourselves,

we will be, if not happy, at least unbothered.

At least that's what we think we want.

Until we have are there.

And we begin to wonder where God is.

God waits outside the door for us.

He stands at the door and knocks.

He asked again.

What are you doing here Elijah?

God got the same answer.

God spoke to Elijah through the bathroom door.

“Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord,  
for Yahweh is about to pass by.”

Elijah was still angry and unsure he even wanted to be found.

But he listened through the door.

A great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart,  
and shattered the rocks before Yahweh,  
but Yahweh was not in the wind.

After the wind,  
there was an earthquake,  
but Yahweh was not in the earthquake.

After the earthquake,  
came a fire,  
but the Lord was not in the fire.

But again, to know context is to know that

Earth, wind and fire, in addition to being a band in the 70's,

Earth wind and fire



were three of the four classical elements,  
the powers of the ancient world.

Elijah listened from his cave to the recognized powers.

The power of the earth for sustenance.

The power of the wind, for movement and momentum.

The power of fire, for heat and light.

It was all the powers Elijah could possibly ask for,  
or dare to receive,

power he called down on Mount Carmel.

Fire that blew in and burned up the earth and the water  
of the altar.

All of that was present, and God wasn't in any of it.

God isn't in your power to sustain, to move, to energize.

He won't be found, or heard in your success.

Truth is you'll be too busy running around after your success  
to hear much of anything anyway.

Eventually, you'll find yourself under a tumbleweed somewhere,  
exhausted, discouraged, ready to give it all up.

After the earth, wind and fire,  
came something else, something altogether different.  
It got very quiet on Mount Horeb.

What Elijah heard was so ethereal, so illusive,  
that translators have trouble hearing it,  
putting words to it,  
trouble illustrating it,  
putting a picture to it.

Every translation hears something different,  
it's that tough to make out.

Traditionally it was a still, small voice.  
But also, a gentle, quiet whisper.  
A soft murmuring sound.  
A sound of gentle blowing.  
The sound of sheer silence.  
A silence so loud it speaks.

It was a profound quiet.

Elijah, cracked the metaphorical door.

He looked through.

He wanted to be found by this voice.

Elijah came out of his cave,

with the humility of his mantle wrapped around his eyes,

that mantle that represented God's call on him,

protecting him,

and let himself be found before God.

Elijah found himself in a profound quiet.

Yahweh was in the profound quiet.

Elijah found himself beholden.

It was in the profound quiet, that God spoke.

What are you doing here Elijah?

Elijah's answer hadn't changed.

But fortunately, God isn't a pragmatist.

He basically ignored Elijah's concern because he knew there was more.

God said,

Go back, return on your way.

You will be anointing a new king of Aram, of Syria.

You will be anointing a new king of Israel.

You will be anointing and training Elisha  
a young prophet to take your place.

You aren't the only one left, there are thousands.

Elijah came down the mountain, renewed in purpose,  
aware the God is always at work.

Elijah came down from the mountain

like Moses did, with his face aglow,

renewed in his call,

renewed in his relationship with God,

renewed for what God had next,

because he had heard the profound silence.

He had heard God.

Mountain top experiences are stunning.

They are those life-changing dramatic moments,

the kind that forever change the direction of your story,

an event that forces you to go back

and rewrite everything that ever happened to you,  
from a new perspective.

An event that requires you to change  
your future course.

The prophet Elijah had a mountain top experience.

But if you know the date and the place,

you will realize that it wasn't at the drama of Mount Carmel.

It happened at God's address,

in the profound quiet after all the moving and shaking.

In seeking a mountaintop experience with God

make sure you are going up the right mountain

make sure you are at the right place,

at God's address.

The place where he speaks with a still, small voice,

a voice that rejuvenates your call, and renews your purpose,

his is not the voice that impresses you with power and might.

Ensure that your mountaintop experience is at the right place,  
so that you may come down,  
not to more running, discouragement and exhaustion,  
but instead  
to renewed call, purpose, awareness  
and relationship with God.

When you make it to God's address,  
there you will be at the right time and in the right place.  
there you will have and know your story

Amen.