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**Two Mountains (1 Kings 18: 17-40)**  
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Two mountains dominate the landscape of Elijah's story. Mount Carmel, where Elijah does battle with the prophets of Baal and convinces the people of Yahweh's sovereignty; and Mount Horeb, where he subsequently flees to escape the wrath of Jezebel, and experiences another, quite different divine epiphany. Linking these two mountains, these two episodes in Elijah's life, is what theologian James Alison has called 'the collapse of the sacred'.<sup>1</sup> This process of sacred collapse remains, I believe, of the utmost importance as we seek to learn true worship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Tonight, I want to share something of what I think it means.

Elijah, you'll recall from last week, lived in the time of King Ahab. Ahab, according to the Book of Kings, has forsaken the way of the Lord to worship Baal, the god of his wife Jezebel, and a drought has come upon the land. After three years, the Lord sends Elijah to meet with him, and Elijah promptly orchestrates a competition designed to prove which god is greater. Ahab is instructed to call all Israel to assemble at Mount Carmel, together with four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18: 19). Two bulls are sacrificed and prepared for burning on the altar, but the fire is not lit. The prophets of Baal and of Yahweh must call upon their respective gods to complete their sacrifice, and Elijah declares – to the approval of the people – that 'the god who answers by fire is indeed God' (1 Kings 18: 24)

The prophets of Baal go first. As their prayers and litanies pile up with increasing desperation, Elijah mocks them.<sup>2</sup> 'Call out in a loud voice, for he is a god. Perhaps he is

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<sup>1</sup> James Alison, 'Theology Amidst the Stones and Dust' in *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), p.30.

<sup>2</sup> Alison, 'Theology Amidst the Stones and Dust', p.28.

chatting or occupied or off on a journey. Perhaps he is sleeping and will awake'.<sup>3</sup> But the time for the oblation comes and goes, and there is 'no voice, no answer, and no response'. (1 Kings 18: 29). Then comes Elijah's turn and, after having very deliberately rebuilt the altar of Yahweh which had been thrown down, using twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel, and after having drenched his sacrifice with water so as to make it apparently unkindle-able, he calls on the Lord to answer him. 'Boom!' Fire comes down and consumes the offering. 'All present fall to the ground, crying "The Lord is the true God"'. Elijah immediately takes advantage of this unanimity to point his finger at the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, ordering that they be seized and killed'.<sup>4</sup> It's a bloodthirsty triumph.

Its sequel then is surprising. Jezebel threatens Elijah's life and he flees. He comes to the wilderness where he sits alone, under a solitary broom tree, wishing he could die. Twice an angel comes, bringing food and water, waking him up to eat, telling him he must keep up his strength for a journey of forty days and nights to Mount Horeb – the mountain where Moses met with God. Off he goes, but once there at Horeb 'Elijah hides in a cave, where God has to come and find the disillusioned prophet'.<sup>5</sup> God asks what he's doing there, and Elijah replies: '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 18: 10).

At this point, God orders him out of the cave and tells him to stand where he will pass by. You know what happens next: 'first comes a mighty wind which rends the mountains and breaks the rocks in pieces, but the Lord was not in the wind. Then comes an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake, and then comes a fire but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire there comes a still small voice',<sup>6</sup> or (in the

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<sup>3</sup> Alter, *Ancient Israel*, p.702.

<sup>4</sup> Alison, 'Theology Amidst the Stones and Dust', p.28.

<sup>5</sup> Alison, 'Theology Amidst the Stones and Dust', p.28.

<sup>6</sup> Alison, 'Theology Amidst the Stones and Dust', p.28.

beautiful translation of the NRSV) ‘a sound of sheer silence’ (1 Kings 18: 12). When Elijah hears this ‘sound of silence’, he comes to the entrance of his cave where again ‘there came a voice to him that said: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” The disconsolate prophet complains once more that: ‘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’. Then, in an extraordinary anticlimax, God sends him off on a couple of routine prophetic tasks (including appointing his own successor), remarking in passing that there are actually seven thousand in Israel whose knees have not bowed to Baal. Thereafter, Elijah’s ‘interventions are few, until he’s whisked off to heaven and Elisha’s ministry begins’.<sup>7</sup>

What are we to make of all this? Here’s what Alison suggests. ‘What seems to be a story of the triumph of Yahwism is in fact presented as the story of the un-deceiving of Elijah’.<sup>8</sup> On Mount Carmel, Elijah understands himself as a champion fighter, one who is zealous for his Lord and, in the name of this Lord, authorized to murder his opponents. He is self-confident, mocking, secure in his righteousness. The battle is between two rival gods and Yahweh, Elijah’s god, is bigger. Yet after this bloody episode, which he wins, ‘Elijah sinks into a depression, and doubts the value of all that’.<sup>9</sup> ‘It is enough; now, O Lord [he says], take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors’ (1 Kings 18: 4). And by the time he gets to Mount Horeb, what’s beginning to emerge for Elijah is a very different experience of God and so a very different view of what it means to be zealous on God’s behalf. If the Carmel episode is all about identifying God with pyrotechnics and special effects, this is precisely what is undone on Mount Horeb. According to Alison, ‘all the commotion around Mount Horeb is presented as something rather like a deconstruction of the sacred scenario ..., for the Lord was present in the still small voice,

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<sup>7</sup> Alison, ‘Theology Amidst the Stones and Dust’, p.29.

<sup>8</sup> Alison, ‘Theology Amidst the Stones and Dust’, p.29.

<sup>9</sup> Alison, ‘Theology Amidst the Stones and Dust’, p.29.

rather than in something of more imposing majesty'.<sup>10</sup> And Elijah's role in relation to this still small voice is humbler, and considerably more self-effacing than his previous prophetic persona.

I find this a profound reading of the two mountains in Elijah's story and, as Alison points out, it reveals 'the theological process which is at work in the development of the Hebrew scriptures'. That process is the progressive collapse of the violent sacred, and the recognition that God is not one of the gods, not a magician and not manipulable by sacrifice. In the beginning, Elijah sees himself in rivalry (on Yahweh's behalf) with the prophets of Baal, a rivalry which leads to and legitimates sacrifice and violence. By the end, he is glimpsing that all that sound and fury has little to do with God. By way of his own disillusionment and the collapse of his own sense of importance, by way of the cracking of his heart, a still small voice which operates at an entirely different level has begun to reach him. The same dynamic is narrated in the story of Paul, who also begins full of zeal, persecuting and murdering those he perceives as enemies of the Lord, until he too is disillusioned and utterly undone, realizing 'that in his zeal to serve God, it had been God whom he had been persecuting'.<sup>11</sup>

The violent sacred is horribly active in our world – ISIS, Boko Haram, Christian and Hindu fundamentalism – wherever zeal for 'God' legitimates sacrifice and murder, there is a small 'g' 'god' operating at our level, transforming nothing, an ideology wielded in the service of domination and oppression. Repudiating this violent sacred, many of our contemporaries abandon worship altogether – assuming all religion is cut from the same cloth. With this story of Elijah, we are shown the possibility of another way; it involves a gradual liberation from our own violent and self-righteous tendencies, as we learn to know ourselves as *with* others – no better and no worse – and so to hear the still small voice of One who is only ever *creative* of community and life, and whose worship is the fruit of a humble and contrite spirit, a broken-open heart.

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<sup>10</sup> Alison, 'Theology Amidst the Stones and Dust', p.29.

<sup>11</sup> Alison, 'Theology Amidst the Stones and Dust', p.32.