

The Call as a Question

The contemporary poet Marie Howe often begins her poetry classes with this basic advice—she suggests that we treat the poem not as a sort of language game or as a collection of abstract ideas, but to try insofar as possible to engage the poem as a physical reality—as something that can even elicit a quite visceral or tactile reaction. To this end she suggests running one’s finger over the words as they are read, searching or scanning, as she puts it, for the real “heat” of the poem, for that moment when the poem ceases to be something outside or other than you, and instead finds a place of deep resonance somewhere within.

For an example of this type of reading, I’ll try to walk us through our text a bit today, reading it with this type of searching or scanning method, trying to point out some possible moments of heat or resonance.

First though, we might need a bit of the historical context as this story begins rather abruptly, as we read: *“Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done.”* Ahab and Jezebel were King and Queen of the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the 9th –century BC, a time in which the old ways of Moses were being left behind and actively persecuted against, Elijah being one of the prophets under threat, and as is often the case between the prophetic and the political modes, Elijah, whose name means “My God is Yahweh,” found himself again and again in conflict with Ahab and Jezebel.

The most recent conflict was a pretty dramatic one—a sort of prophet’s duel between Elijah representing his God Yahweh, and 850 other prophets representing other gods of the time like Asherah and Ba’al. The contest was that both parties tried to call down fire from the heavens as a sign of God’s favor. The short version of it goes that Elijah wins, and in victory has the other prophets killed. As he leaves he prays again, this time for the rains to come, and again his prayer is answered, thus ending the three years of draught and famine that had plagued the land.

Instead of having his success lauded, however, these actions only further enrage King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and Elijah, now seemingly the only prophet left, finds himself banished into the wilderness. And here’s where my finger stops today for the first time, when we read: *“But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough...take away my life.” Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.”*

My feeling is that here the text breathes for the first time, and there’s room for us to enter it. For really, who, at one time or another, hasn’t felt like the prophet here? Felt exhausted and empty, as if one’s best efforts had come to naught? Felt also almost unbearably alone, one solitary individual pitted against the complex and inexorable machinery of world?

But then suddenly an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.”

The poet Rilke has a nice take on this pivotal moment in the text, *“If the angel deigns to come, it will be because you have convinced her, not by your tears, but by your humble resolve to make a beginning, to be a beginner.”*

Elijah found himself at the end of one phase—tired and alone and sitting under a tree. “In my end is my beginning,” as another poet has put it, and this might very well have been Elijah’s prayer as he fell asleep—“in my end is my beginning”—a prayer that seems good enough to have convinced the angel of new beginnings to come and pay him a visit.

And so on my first reading at least, there was enough heat here at this moment, enough of a resonance to make me linger a bit with this thought about how every ending in life presents its own type of new beginning, it’s own chance to become again, as Rilke puts it, a beginner.

For the second and final reading this week, I followed another common tip for reading scripture and I looked at this story as told by a different translation, this time by the venerable King James Version from 1611.

Again, the finger was scanning, searching for that moment of heat, that moment of deep resonance.

This time I made it a bit further into the story, following Elijah as he ate the angel’s bread and drank the angel’s cup; following him as he journeyed a mythical forty days and forty nights towards the mythical mountain where Moses once stood; following him at last into that cave where he spent his first night on the mountain.

And then my finger stopped again as I came upon that call from God which echoed deep into Elijah’s cave, that call which startled him from his slumber, a call which sounds at once arcane and enigmatic in the old English,

And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said unto him, What doest thou here, Elijah?

What doest thou here? It has a bit more heat, doesn’t it, than the more contemporary version we heard, with its question: *“What are you doing here?”*

“What are you doing here?” We might hear that when we surprise our family by visiting them a day early, or if we stumble into a party that we haven’t been invited to, but “What doest thou here?” strikes a totally different chord.

The Hawaiian pastor Wayne Cordeiro tells a story which gets at the difference between these two senses in which we might hear this question:

“There’s an old story of a rabbi living in a Russian city a century ago. Disappointed by his lack of direction and life purpose he wandered out into the chilly evening. With hands thrust deep into his pockets, he aimlessly walked through the empty streets, questioning his faith in God, the scriptures and his calling to ministry. The only thing colder than the winter air was the chill within his own soul. He was so enshrouded by his own despair that he mistakenly wandered into a Russian military compound that was off-limits to civilians.

The silence of the evening chill was shattered by the bark of a soldier. “Who are you? And what are you doing here?” “Excuse me?” replied the rabbi. “I said, ‘Who are you and what are you doing here?!’” After a brief moment the rabbi, in a gracious tone so as not to provoke the soldier, said,

“How much do you get paid every day?”

“What does that have to do with you?” the soldier retorted. With some delight, as though he had just made a discovery, the rabbi said, “I will pay you the equal sum if you will ask me those same two questions every day: Who are you? and What are you doing here?”

I think much like the rabbi, Elijah found himself wandering around alone in search of answers as he questioned everything—questioning God, the scriptures, his sense of calling. And surprisingly, also like the rabbi, his salvation came to him, not as an answer to his questions, but as a new and as a better question.

And so again, with my finger paused here for now, I find myself wondering about the relationship between questions and answers when it comes to the life of faith. I think about all those who today might feel left out of religious communities because as I’ve heard it said recently, “I just have too many questions.” I think about all those bumper stickers or slogans that say things like, “Jesus is the answer.” I think also about a new book about Jesus which suggests that Jesus was really more of a question person than an answer person, and which uses as evidence the fact that in the Gospels Jesus asks more than 300 questions but only seems to directly answer less than 10; and then I think again about Elijah on the mountain, about the wind splitting the rocks, and after the wind an earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; and after the fire the sound of sheer silence...

And then somewhere within that sheer silence, I think about the call that comes to him, not once, but twice, the call that comes with a question mark, *What doest thou here?*

And so here I take my finger off the page, even as the questions still echo within: what if God’s call comes to us not always as an answer to the questions that we bring, but also in the form of a question posed to us? What if, in the end, God is the question to our every answer?