



“Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be reckoned as righteous[a] by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.”

The angel of GOD came back, shook him awake again, and said, “Get up and eat some more—you’ve got a long journey ahead of you.”

Last night, Ann emailed me to make sure she had our first reading correct. It’s long and bloody, she noted, with more than a few massacres. It was correct, and while perhaps more jarring than my usual style, the story of a prophet seeking truth is ever so appropriate to a world seeking truth.

In this reading, we find Elijah scared and dejected, afraid for his life after hearing of Jezebel’s desire to eliminate him. This is a far cry from the previous chapter, in which he has taken on 450 rivals, proudly fighting to recognize the God who led his people to freedom as the true God of Israel.

Still persecuted after this conflict, self doubt sets in, and he flees to the wilderness, where he prays for an end to his life, recognizing that he cannot go it alone any longer. God, in this moment, reminds him of the truth over and over again. He, and Israel, have a future beyond his current existence, and he is not alone. Again, and again, God builds him up and sends him forward. In short, to quote Marianne Williamson, “Elijah’s playing small doesn’t serve the world.” He is a political dissenter, who will not adhere to the law of Ahab and Jezebel. His faith in God will not allow him to live in a kingdom where the poor and vulnerable were exploited, and the powerful could act with impunity. While he can certainly be viewed as a model for standing up for Christianity, let us never forget that his fight comes 870 years before Christ’s appearance on this earth.

It wasn’t a fight for religion over atheism, nor Christianity over paganism. Reducing Elijah’s life to fighting for such constructs belies the much bigger point: Elijah was fighting for truth in a world that had lost its way.

Ann Lamott says this about truth:

When I was a child, I thought grown-ups and teachers knew the truth. . . . It took years for me to discover that the first step in finding out the truth is to begin unlearning almost everything adults had taught me. . . . Their main pitch was that achievement equaled happiness, when all you had to do was study rock stars, or movie stars, or them, to see that they were mostly miserable. They were all running around in mazes like everyone else.

Elijah, caught in his own maze, retreated to solitude and silence. Expecting to find God on mountaintops and in battle, instead God spoke to him in silence, and God said “keep going”. Elijah’s truth came through rejecting the status quo, re-evaluating the path that he was on, and most importantly, through deep study and reflection of what a God, a God we know to still be speaking, was truly asking of him.

920 years later, Paul’s letter to the Galatians reiterates the same basic concept. We are still called by God to seek truth, but through a different lens. It’s a tricky passage to manage...much like our reading from Kings, it can be unjustly applied as an anti semitic example of replacement theology. Just as interpreters over time have made Elijah’s fight one against paganism as opposed to one against injustice, many have also made the case that Paul teaches us now that Jesus’ work is over, we no longer need Judaism. It’s anything but. Diana Butler Bass, in a recent writing, reminds us that Paul was a Jew, a point he makes with a sense of appreciation and pride numerous times in his writings. His focus on Christ didn’t negate his Jewish identity, he continued to live as a Jew, with a mission to bring everyone together under the teachings and radical inclusion of Christ.

What he was doing here was calling his people to rethink their theology, to recognize that there had been an appropriate purpose for Jewish law, but with the faith brought to us by Christ, that purpose was no longer needed.

God is still speaking, Paul essentially reminds us, and living out the truths that bring us closer to God’s kingdom require us to remain firm in our resolve to always look for how we can maintain focus on the teachings within, not in spite of the times we are living in. This is why I

find it so unsettling when people pull passages out of context, specifically those which seek to oppress other children of God, with the justification that “it’s in the Bible, so it must be true”. Did they not hear Paul’s clear admonition that laws come and go, but faith remains? To take scripture seriously requires honoring it with time and study. As Elijah reminds us, truth doesn’t come easy.

Both the prophet and the apostle truly loved their people, and loved their God. They sought ways to bring their people closer to God in very different ways, in very different times, demonstrating that strength in faith requires some level of giving up our own preconceptions in pursuit of truth.

Nearly 1900 years later, another Jewish kid would come along, born of migrant parents into the somewhat hostile world of Long Island. While he would go on to view religion in general as being peppered with hypocrisy, the core tenets of his faith never ceased to guide his life. Like Paul, he proudly shared his Jewish identity, and like Elijah, did so rebelliously, in a time in which being Jewish was still generally derided by American society. He was Jewish at a time in which a local Nazi organization popped up in his own American neighborhood, proudly flying the swastika from its clubhouse. This awareness of Jewish place in contemporary culture, combined with early understanding of his own sexuality gave Harvey Milk a true and deep understanding of the injustice of being othered, one that would cement his resolve to seek justice for the rest of his life.

Like Elijah, Milk found himself unsure of what to do with his life, which led him to carry his love for country, despite injustice, into the Navy. He enlisted as an officer candidate at age 21, and was praised by his

battalion commander as an outstanding leader. He was appointed as an officer a year later, and served on rescue submarine missions in the Korean War. Despite being forced out of the military due to his sexuality three years later, opting to resign rather than face legal prosecution, Harvey Milk continued to love his country and value his service to the extent that he was still wearing his Navy belt buckle on the day his life was taken by an assassin's bullet, 25 years after he left military service.

Milk would go on to publicly and passionately advocate for a more just America, in which being openly and proudly gay would no longer carry the risk of persecution, or prosecution. He became a public figure, community leader, and advocate not only for the LGBTQ community, but to end the bureaucracy that challenged small businesses across San Francisco. Advocating for the same decentralization of wealth and empowerment of the traditionally oppressed that Elijah fought against in his time, and that Jesus stood for, inspiring Paul's letter.

In his role as one of the first openly gay city officials in the nation, Milk spoke with truth, courage and conviction. Knowing his life would be in danger, he still advocated to end injustice, at one point speaking out against an unjust proposition to ban gay teachers and anyone who supported them from San Francisco public schools with these words:

We are coming out to fight the lies, the myths, the distortions. We are coming out to tell the truths about gays, for I am tired of the conspiracy of silence, so I'm going to talk about it. And I want you to talk about it.

I want you to talk about it. Have we not heard the same encouragement from Paul? That our faith, and our commitment to ending oppression means distancing ourselves from blindly following laws created during a different time, for a far different purpose that is no longer valid?

Milk's life embodied the strength of Elijah with the conviction of Paul. He is a person who deserves honor and recognition not just because of his role as a member of a traditionally marginalized group, but because of his embodiment of everything that we believe our nation stands for. When I read of the recent decision to strip his name from a ship that finally honored his many gifts and accomplishments, it strikes me that he embodies the exact warrior ethos that our secretary of defense so frequently references. I wonder if those who seek to erase Milk from history even know his story.

Just like those who would pull biblical quotes as justification for oppression, it seems there are still plenty of people in this world who would benefit from seeking, speaking and honoring truth.

And those are the people who,

just as they did nearly 3,000 years ago in the time of Elijah,

deserve nothing less than our passionate resistance.