

## *On Being of One Mind*

1 Kings 18:20-39

Saturday Morning Cartoons. You might think it would be the proper context for a contest bordering on the ridiculous. But “Saturday Morning Cartoons” is not only a TV event, it is also an ice cream flavor at the Charmery. The Charmery is the ice cream shop two blocks from my house in Hampden (I know it well), and not the least of their special flavors is Saturday Morning Cartoons.

I, myself, find the idea of “Saturday Morning Cartoons” a bit off-putting. As for the ice cream down the street, it appears to be vanilla, chock-full of Lucky Charms. And, for me, the sight of neon marshmallows does not inspire happy thoughts of childhood — and maybe that’s because, as a kid, both cartoons and sugary cereals were off-limits. (My family was all-Cheerios and all-business, all the time.) “Hearts, stars and horse-shoes” do not read to me, “magically delicious.”

I was similarly out-of-my-element in an improv class I took last fall. Level I had gone pretty well, so I’d decided to “advance.” The defining moment of my Level II career is one I recall only selectively.

My instructor set-up the exercise:

- Divide into two lines, facing each other, about 8 people on each side.
- You will compete against each other ...
- Think of the craziest, wildest super-powers you can imagine ...
- And then, one person at a time, just dash-out into the middle of the room, act-out your super-power, and let it roll ...
- Just keep doing that, alternating teams ... each team trying to take-down the other one ... and just make it bigger and bigger and bigger, and louder, and just go crazy with it!

By the time the instructor was done, utter paralysis and fear had already taken-hold of every fiber of my being.

As I mentioned, I hadn’t seen a lot of Saturday morning cartoons. There did not seem to be a substantial imaginative repertoire from which I thought I could draw. And here’s what was worse: I was a 43-year old woman in a class full of young men in their 20’s. I was outnumbered, out-aged, and out-“manned.” When I surveyed the teams and considered my lack of cartoon knowledge, it seemed a sure indication I had lost before it had all even started.

Despite my inner protestation, the contest ensued. I wanted desperately to disappear. And somehow, that particular super-power (*i.e.* disappearance) did not come to mind. On the contest went: bigger and bigger. I felt smaller and smaller — and yet somehow, I was totally conspicuous. Rather than ever do that again, I think I might actually prefer a bowl of Saturday Morning Cartoons.

All of this is to say: When the lectionary served-up a cartoonish, super-power-laden, hyperbolic, bigger and bigger, louder and louder, blood-letting, bordering-on-psychotic-tendencies “Game of Thrones” event, I went right-back to Cheerios. In other words: all-business, all the time.

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I read our passage from First Kings and found it a bit off-putting. Its unsavory elements are undeniable:

- violence and aggression
- denigration of beliefs and practices that differ from our own
- rejection of a fertility cult — and (perhaps by implication) feminine power
- and, the “Old Testament God.”

You get the idea: I was trending toward the whole-grain side of homiletics.

I began to suspect that perhaps I was taking things a bit too seriously ... It so happens I know a couple of guys who are pretty familiar with this Elijah narrative. And, while I won't name these characters ... the one who also lives a few blocks from the Charmery has neither admitted nor denied that he has sampled the “Cartoons.” And, at least one of them has done Improv, and not just Level I and II. When I talked with them about the text — at a coffee shop and in passing here at church — not surprisingly, their take on the passage was a bit different from mine.

They didn't ignore the business to which I felt compelled to attend. But they also allowed for, and appreciated, the craziness of the contest and the Shazam-like superpowers of God. And rightly so. This text, I've decided, for all its raucous behavior and insanity ... this story wants me — maybe wants us — to come and play.<sup>1</sup>

Here are a few spots where I feel the tug of improv. As if a friend might be saying, “Come on, come do this scene with me.” And so, a bit nervous, I take the stage with her. The audience give us some inputs ... impossible odds, attention to detail, taunting, water, fire. So, here's what we come up with:

- 1 prophet proposes a contest against 450 of his colleagues  
*[impossible odds]*
- Said prophet sets-up the contest, lays-out the rules, pulls-out specs for the construction jobs he has in mind; and himself, meticulously stacks wood and

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<sup>1</sup> See Walter Brueggemann. “Troubler of Israel,” in *1& 2 Kings, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*, ed. R. Scott Nash (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 219. “The entire [Elijah] narrative is presented in a leisurely, playful way.”

places stone  
[attention to detail]

- When things are looking bad for the opposing team, this prophet indelicately suggests that their god is meditating at a time when they should be acting. Their god has gone for a walk. Their god is on a long journey. Or, perhaps their god is sound asleep and needs a wake-up call. Or, maybe just maybe their god is taking a spa day. Or they're in Vegas. Or whatever ...  
[and that would be the taunting ...]
- And our friend, the prophet, continues with the details and assures, by his instruction, that everything will be incontrovertibly soaked with water.
- Finally, the whole thing, water included, will go up in flames.

Impossible odds, attention to detail, taunting, water, and fire. End of scene.

Somehow, this text manages at once to be theater of the absurd and theater of the real; silly and serious; comic and tragic. It's no wonder I've found myself of two minds about it.

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And I'm not the only one — of two minds. So are most of the people in this passage. At its outset, Elijah asks the people:

“How long will you go *limping* with two different opinions?  
If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”

And later, at the altar, the people “*limp*” again. Their limping, though, is not from exhaustion or humiliation — which, from the tragic point of view, seems to be a reasonable response. And they're not limping from a comic point of view either: they're not practicing physical comedy. In fact, the Hebrew word, “limping,” suggests the people have become disabled by their “different opinions.”

The people “engage in a cultic dance in celebration of Baal [at the same time they are] professing Yahweh.”<sup>2</sup> The people are of two minds, and it is debilitating. They “limp.”

The tension under which they seem to be collapsing is not so much between serious and silly, as it is, to whom will they give their loyalty? Will they put their faith in Canaanite religion? Or, will they return their hearts to Yahweh? It seems they're stuck, somewhere in the middle — and they're hedging their bets. They're not ready to give-up

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann. “Troubler of Israel,” 223-224.

on the fertility cult; but their ancestral, theological heritage is with the Lord.<sup>3</sup> And so they're "limping with two different opinions."

That the "limping" occurs in our story, actually makes a lot of sense — given the historic and theological contexts. Odds for the Lord have been looking a bit bleak, and it's not a simple matter of 450 prophets to one. What had been one kingdom that had coalesced under the reign of Solomon, David, and Saul, is now two kingdoms.

The odds for God and his people don't look as promising as they did at the very beginning. Not as promising as, "I will make of you a great nation." (Genesis 12: 2) Or, "Look toward heaven and count the stars ... so shall your descendants be." (Genesis 15:5) In fact, the night sky is darker; and the "nation," no longer "great." Things look bleak.

It's one hundred years and seven rulers after the United Kingdom. It's a kingdom now divided into South and North, Judah and Israel. And Israel (the Northern Kingdom) is where Elijah prophesies during the rule of Ahab and Jezebel. By the time the Northern Kingdom is all said and done — when the Assyrians move in and occupy the land ... in the span of this 200-year kingdom — eight kings will be killed or or kill themselves, and seven more will have reigned for less than 2 years. The death of King Robert Barathion and all its consequences has nothing on the chaos of God's people.

And so, lacking helpful leadership, the people hedge their bets. God's people are not ready to give-up on the fertility cult; but their ancestral, theological heritage is with the Lord. They "limp," with two different opinions." They are of two minds.

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Kenneth Pargament is a psychologist who understands the dilemma of "two minds." His area of expertise is *not* Schizophrenia (as you might expect), or even what's been known as "Multiple Personality Disorder" — when the mind seems to split into various identities for the sake of its own survival. Instead of studying those disorders, Pargament devotes his energy to the ideas of "spiritual dis-integration" and "spiritual integration." He offers these categories as a way of understanding what can occur, spiritually, when faithful people encounter acute distress.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Walter Brueggemann, "Troubler of Israel," 224. "The famous phrase 'limp along on two opinions' dramatizes Israel's perennial attempt to have it both ways. To choose against Yahweh is impossible in Israel; but to choose singularly for Yahweh appears to be excessively radical and costly. The issue is endlessly a life-or-death issue for Israel. ... When the faithful are neither hot nor cold, there is no clear passion in any direction."

<sup>4</sup> See Kenneth Pargament. *Spiritually-Integrated Psychotherapy: understanding and addressing the sacred*. In particular, Chapter 5, "In Times of Stress: Spiritual Coping to Conserve the Sacred," and Chapter 6, "In Times of Stress: Spiritual Coping to Transform the Sacred."

Prior to my own work as a psychotherapist, I was a chaplain for ten years. I spent my time with people whose lives had been upturned. For many years, I visited people in their homes — people who had elected to receive palliative and hospice care surrounded by their loved ones, in spaces that brought them not the beeping and prodding of the hospital, not trips back and forth for treatment — but comfort.

On one occasion, I drove out to a home somewhere on the way to Taneytown — way out in the country. To get there took me over an hour. When I arrived to the large, brick home and beautiful property, I met the people lived there. A husband and wife who had built their dream home, where they'd raised their family. The day before our visit, they'd been to see their daughter. A freshman in college, their daughter had just learned for the first time, "Mom's on hospice."

"Mom" was a 54-year old woman, diagnosed with Cancer, and the disease was in its final stages. Mom and Dad sat together on their living room couch: bereft, frightened, tired. I took all of it in as I sat with them. The day — and that small, sacred space — was filled with mixed emotions. Relief to be home, along with concern for their daughter. I saw trust and compassion between dad and mom, husband and wife. As they talked about their weekend, their family, and their account of living with cancer, I listened.

And then, after a pause, I asked about how they were doing — spiritually. The wife, who was in her final months and days, said that the beliefs and practices of her faith tradition gave her a sense of peace. Her faith community was a secure base for her, the g/God of her understanding was a g/God of comfort. Somehow, even in the midst of incredible pain and disappointment, things *held together* for her.

But her husband's heart — and soul — was in a markedly different place. On the topic of spirituality, this couple's collective mind was fractured, even split. The husband had been reserved as we'd sat together. He supported his wife the best way he knew how: remaining by her side, and honoring her wishes and needs.

When I checked-in with him, he was honest with me. "I'm miserable ... It makes me feel so bad to see her cry." He went on to say, "I believe in God, but my wife and I are not on the same page with religion. I would never even step on an ant ...". His voice trailed off. He seemed wounded by a g/God who had failed to keep his wife out of harm's way. "I would never even step on an ant," he said. His very soul had been *split-apart*. It was *dis-integrating*.

On that day, as we sat in that sacred space, it appeared that this couple, would lose their contest between life and death. Their odds were considerably worse than 450 to one. It was an impossible, poignant space. Unknowing — and yet trusting. Ambivalent — and yet steadfast. Wounded — and yet whole. They were "limping;" and yet, held together.

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For them, it was a matter of life and death. And so, too, for the people at the contest at Mt. Carmel — and perhaps even for us. The tension between death and life can only go on for so long. God knows. And so does Elijah.

Elijah calls the people out on their “different opinions.”<sup>5</sup> The contest that ensues — including its violence and aggression, its apparent denigration of differing beliefs and practices, its rejection of a fertility cult, and its “Old Testament God” — the nature of this contest “indicates the heavy stakes in the issue.”<sup>6</sup> It is about life and death, death — and life.

Elijah prays:

“O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel,  
let it be known this day that you are God in Israel,  
that I am your servant,  
and that I have done all these things at your bidding.

Answer me, O Lord, answer me, [*he prays ...*  
*not so much that I myself have been vindicated this day*]  
rather, ... that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God,  
and that you have turned their hearts back.”

To whom will the people give their loyalty? Will they put their faith in Canaanite religion? Or, will they return their hearts to God? Elijah asks God for an answer.

The answer comes. And it comes in fire that swallows-up water, wood, stone, and dust. In this way — not unlike Queen Daenerys Targaryen and her dragons — God assures her power with fire ... in the midst of a people in chaos ... a people increasingly marginalized ... a divine-human relationship in shambles. When Elijah painstakingly places those twelve stones on the altar and prays, he calls the people to remember God’s faithfulness from Abraham to Isaac to David to Israel, from Sarah to Rebekah to wives and consorts and women unnamed. The fire that consumes the soaking-wet altar is a sign of God’s power and presence.

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At last, the people are of one mind. They have chosen life: life in God. And this God does not flip-flop on them or upon us or upon the world she has created. God’s own heart never turns. God is patient with us, still, as we limp around, holding onto one thing before we can let go of the other. And then, finally, God calls us out:

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<sup>5</sup> See Walter Brueggeman. “Troubler of Israel,” 224. “The prophet insists that the two loyalties are mutually exclusive and one cannot have it both ways.”

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann. “Troubler of Israel,” 219.

From the fire and water at the altar ...  
To the flames of Pentecost ...  
And the water at the font ...

We are compelled to respond:

“The Lord, indeed, is God.”  
“The Lord, indeed, is God.”