

“Too Much”¹

1 Kings 19:1-18

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When I was in first grade, we were told to bring our favorite book to school. We were going to have our pictures made with the book. I mulled over the choice, weighing one book against another. (I’ve been a nerd since birth, so this was a big decision.) Finally, I settled on Robert McCloskey’s *Time of Wonder*.

I brought it to school the following day, excited, ready to pose for the camera. All was well...until I ran into Ginny Hamilton. Ginny was carrying *her* favorite book: the Bible, of course. Immediately, the guilt kicked in. I thought: I should have brought my Bible. Why didn’t I bring my Bible? I was, after all, raised in the Bible belt. In fact, this year my hometown was named “The Most Bible-minded City in the US”² I hadn’t considered the Bible as I thought about my favorite book. And to make matters worse, I knew *why* I hadn’t considered it. The Bible was definitely *not* my favorite book.

I still love the book I chose, *Time of Wonder*, in part because it’s an escape to a world I’ve never seen, a tiny island off the coast of Maine. Everything in the book is beautiful, new, and interesting—the watercolor pictures, the quirky place names like Penobscot and Eggamoggin, and even the book’s end, when the winds of a hurricane rage outside the family’s home and the children and their parents huddle safely inside playing Parcheesi and waiting to explore the new landscape that’s been unearthed by the winds and rain once the storm has passed.

In the story, the violent storm never feels like a threat, just an adventure. I love to escape to that sort of world when I read. The Bible, on the other hand, isn’t much of a beach book, and it’s not an easy read or a means of escape. Now Christians have certainly, and not always wrongly, been accused of being escapists, of pining for the hereafter to avoid the responsibilities and heartaches of the here and now, or of privileging a superficial peace or cheerfulness above all. But the Bible won’t let us get away with that. Our scriptures are hard and beautiful and heartbreaking and full of hope, and at every turn, they lay bare the truth about our world and the truth about ourselves. That isn’t easy, and it’s no escape. And yet, on most weeks, especially weeks like the one we’ve just had with the mass shootings at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, I am grateful that neither our scripture nor our God is detached from the brokenness of our world.

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The world of the prophet Elijah may seem distant from ours. We don’t go around carving up animals to sacrifice; most of us don’t interpret natural disasters as a sign of God’s displeasure. But at its core, Elijah’s experience isn’t all that different from our own. When we find Elijah fleeing to the wilderness, he is running from a world that is growing more and more violent and more and more at odds with God’s intentions for Israel. He’s angry and disenchanted with the political scene. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were notoriously bad rulers, and Elijah has watched as Jezebel systematically slaughtered the prophets of the Lord, the ones who keep reminding

her there is a higher authority than hers in the land. For years Elijah has been isolated and on the run; he's been fearful and without food or shelter.

But then, just before he heads out to the wilderness again, Elijah has his moment. He's staged a showdown between the prophets of the Lord (just him), and the prophets of Jezebel's God Baal. He invites all the people of Israel in hopes that they will turn their hearts back to Yahweh and quit following Baal. It's like a prophetic duel. (If this was an 80's movie, it'd be a dance off.) Each camp slaughters a bull, puts it on their altar, and asks their God to send fire from heaven to ignite the burnt offering. The prophets of Baal pray for hours... nothing. And then Elijah, once his opponents have been suitably ridiculed, opens his mouth, and the God of Israel sends a consuming fire. Immediately, the people fall on their faces and worship, proclaiming, "The Lord Yahweh is God."

But that's not enough for Elijah. He interrupts their worship, gets them off their knees, and raises a mob to enact his revenge. They seize and kill all four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal. As soon as Jezebel hears about this, she vows to kill Elijah. And that's where our story picks up this morning: Elijah is fleeing into the desert because he is mired so deeply in this cycle of violence that the only way out is to run—or even to die.

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We are not strangers to the cycle of violence. At times some of us may have the privilege to ignore it or to forget it. Sometimes we may feel so overwhelmed we want to hide from it. But we can't avoid it, especially not this week. This week it erupted again, on a large scale, threatening those who have known acutely what it means to be vulnerable and alienated.

We are not strangers to the cycle of violence. It was Elijah's reality; it's our reality. We are stuck in the cycle, and we participate in it. Today is Juneteenth, a day when we celebrate the final emancipation of every slave in America and a time we mourn the violence that persists every day as a result of it. The cycle continues.

It continues when someone at work yells at us and we come home and yell at our kids, or when one person violates the trust in a family and suddenly each family member is grieving and suspicious. We know that abused children are more likely to grow up to be abusive, and we know that the violence *we've* done often has its source in some unspeakable violence or shame or despair we carry with us.

And then there's the violence we saw this week in Orlando, terrible and terrifying in its scope, preying on those often marginalized in a place that was supposed to be safe. That violence didn't stop on Sunday morning; it continues to gather malicious momentum. It continued when a veteran of Iraq showed up armed and breathing threats at a mosque in Raeford, and it continued again in the accusative, aggressive rhetoric of all our politicians, and yet again as self-stylized crusaders travel to Orlando to verbally attack the victims' families while they grieve. It's easy to get swept up in the violence, to start pointing the finger, lashing out. Don't I know it; sometimes I just get really angry. It's hard to imagine how to meet violence in any other way.

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Elijah is deeply mired in this cycle. He has been both the victim and the perpetrator. He's on the run to save his life, even as he's unsure if it's worth saving. He's come to the end of himself and his resources, so he curls up under a single tree out in the wilderness and says to God: *Enough*. This is too much, Lord. I'm done.

I wonder how many of us have said that to God—this week, last week, last year. Enough. It's just too much. I'm done.

Have you been there? Maybe not in the fetal position under a broom tree, but crying in the shower or so grieved you can't feel much of anything. Or maybe you are exhausted from being angry or afraid. Have you been so confused you can't imagine a way out or a way forward? Are you just weary of living in your own skin? Elijah is so worn out that the only thing he can imagine to ask of God is that God might let him die. He's come to the end.

But what Elijah doesn't know is that with God that's not a bad place to be. He's done, but God isn't. In fact, Elijah's about to find out that God specializes in making beginnings out of endings, in making life where there is none. God feeds him; God sustains him; God is with him; God speaks to him and directs him. At the moment we think we're finished, God's power gives us the grace we need to keep going. Maybe it's not the sort of thunderous, earth shattering power we expect or think we need. Sometimes it comes in deceptively small, quiet ways—a meal, a question, an assurance that we aren't alone. Or even the death of a little known Jewish teacher alongside a few criminals on a cross outside Jerusalem. In that “small” act, Jesus absorbed all the violence of the past, the present, and the future, revealing that no amount of hatred or despair or confusion or weariness is any match for the grace and power of God. The minute Jesus came out of that tomb, it was over; love won—and not just *any* love, but the self-giving love of Jesus Christ. And so it is our hope that God's steadfast love has triumphed, which gives us courage to confront our brokenness and sin head-on, to meet violence with compassion, and to trust that when we think it's the end, God is just beginning.

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When I was in college, I frequently walked past an old church on the edge of campus. One of the paths led from the university to the main street along campus—the street that had everything from the five-dollar burrito place to the frat houses, to the movie theater, to all the major watering holes. This path went right past the church. As you can imagine, it was a road well traveled. In the middle of the path, the church had placed a sign; it was mostly an invitation to come inside, but it ended this way: “Know that God still cares for this broken world and for all its creatures, and that the cross, even when all else fails, yet makes its appeal.”

I read that sign a lot during my four years—after September 11, before we went to war with Iraq, on the day my friend's father died suddenly. The tragedies of this week brought it to mind, so I emailed the church office to ask if they could tell me exactly what was written on the sign.

It turns out the church removed it a while back during construction. When the work was finished, they didn't put the sign back up. In the words of the church administrator, “Some people felt it was awfully gloomy to attract students to come in.” It might be too gloomy indeed to attract college students, especially the ones who've been told college should be the best four years of their lives or the ones who are busy trying to study or party the gloom away.

But if we avoid the gloom or if we suggest that church is a place to escape it, it's false advertising. The Bible doesn't run from the gloom, and neither should we. In fact, if Elijah is any indication, God sends us straight to the heart of it. Most of what God said to Elijah was simply “Why are you here? Come out. Go back.” Back to the

trouble, the conflict, the risk.³

It was too much for Elijah. It's too much for you and me. But it's not too much for God. It wasn't too much on Good Friday, and it isn't too much now. God's power sustains us in the midst of a journey we cannot handle, and admitting that we can't handle it is in fact the best place to begin.

Notes

1 This sermon was preached seven days after the mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando.

2 <http://www.americanbible.org/features/americas-most-bible-minded-cities> (June 24, 2016).

3 Walter Brueggemann's commentary on 1 Kings 19 in *Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Kings* (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys Publishing, 2000), 237.