

Anyone who thinks the writers of the Bible didn't care about politics because they were so spiritual is dead wrong. The Bible is riddled with political valences. Today's reading is no exception. We have come to the time of the kings, and it is not going well. David was terrific, everybody agrees. Solomon, his son, did some big things though when you read between the lines, he was problematic. But Solomon's successor was such a pill that the northern tribes seceded, taking the name "Israel" with them, and Solomon's successors henceforth ruled the kingdom of Judah. A lot of the stories of the kings are told from this southern, Judahite perspective. What Judah had that Israel didn't have was Jerusalem, and the Temple within Jerusalem. So the northern kingdom, Israel, becomes very suspect from the point of the Judahite writers because its kings are reluctant to go worship at the one and only legitimate Temple due to its location, and they're *highly* likely to apostasize and add other deities into their worship practice for reasons of state and convenience.

King Ahab falls into this category. **Right** before today's reading, we hear this: "As if it had been a light thing for [Ahab] to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshiped him." Well. Enough said about *that* northern king. Next thing we know, boom, Elijah bursts on the scene, with the dreaded prophetic phrase "Thus says the Lord." And what follows is a terrible draught over the land, God's assertion of supremacy over the Sidonians' god Baal. So let's be clear that everything that Elijah says and does is in the context of the choices that King Ahab has made. As our narrator sees it, Elijah is God's answer to Ahab. It is all deeply political. And unseen but very much present in this story is Jezebel, the privileged queen, the Baal-worshiper, the sworn enemy of Elijah.

In today's reading, Elijah spends some time at a wadi, a sort of periodically dry creek, and God sends a raven to feed him—meat, which is actually quite something. Then the drought gets so bad that the wadi dries up entirely, and God sends Elijah to Zarephath, which is about 10-12 miles from Queen Jezebel's hometown. It's a Sidonian/Phoenician town, not Israelite, and the widow whom Elijah asks for food is a Baal-worshiper.

I read this widow as sort of the anti-Jezebel. She comes from Jezebel's area and worships Jezebel's god, but she is desperately vulnerable due to the drought, *and* she nevertheless ends up giving Elijah hospitality (unlike Jezebel who has a target on Elijah's back). The ask he makes is audacious: right before you and your son starve to death, please give me some of your food. But the widow believes Elijah when he tells her that God will renew her flour and oil, and she feeds him. You know, that's the kind of claim that only a desperate person could believe. She *knows* how much food she has, and she *knows* she's this close to death. The idea that God would miraculously renew her supplies would be ludicrous to anyone who had any more reserves. But she is literally at the end of her resources, and Elijah's claim is all she can reach for. The desperate widow feeds Elijah, and she is sustained from day to day—a miracle, every day.

There's a new miracle when the widow's son becomes deathly ill. Because Elijah is in the house, he is available to try to resuscitate the boy. When her son becomes ill, the widow interprets it as some kind of punishment for her sins, asking Elijah what **he** has against her. But when Elijah has revived her son, she says, "Now I know that . . . the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth." In other words, she gives credit to Elijah's God for the life of her son. She sees God in the restored life of her son, not in the wrath she had suspected when he got sick.

Throughout all this drama, a few miles away Jezebel is living like a queen. Jezebel never sees grace (because she doesn't think she needs it), and she never sees the hand of God. The drought would not have affected her personal food supply, and the narrator gives us no evidence that she and Ahab were at all concerned for their subjects. You don't see them tramping around like Good King Wenceslas, bringing food to starving peasants. They know what's going on but it doesn't concern them. Their only concern about the drought is its political impact: it is a constant reminder that Elijah's God is more powerful than Baal, and that reflects badly on them and their legitimacy.

The widow, in her desperation, took a gamble and gave Elijah hospitality. I read an interview recently with an anonymous mid-level employee in the White House, about how he (and others like him) lives with himself. He had entered Republican politics out of college, not exactly for ideological reasons but because it seemed interesting and offered an exciting career path. He was frank that he knows he is enabling tremendous harm to ordinary people, and that he does not believe that it's in service of a greater good. He said, though, that to quit or to repudiate the administration would spell the end of his career in the Republican Party. "What would I do next, sell printer paper?" he asked.

I have some sympathy with that question, having faced a dearth of brilliant career options myself at times. But it also sounds like the question of a not-desperate-enough person, one who is distanced from the possibility of starvation from drought. I mean, yeah, sell printer paper. Is that the worst thing in the world? As the cost of doing your part to expose a corrupt and anti-democratic regime?

I also listened to an interview with Olivia Troye and Miles Taylor, two lifelong

Republicans and civil servants who both resigned their positions in the administration in the last few months. Miles Taylor served in national security, and says that he stayed as long as he did because he was trying to prevent atrocities and catastrophes from happening, that to some extent he was successful, and that every person at high levels of the administration knew clearly that this was an ignorant and unlawful president. Finally, he said, there comes a point where your shelf life expires: you aren't doing any good any more and the people in power refuse to hear you. So he resigned, and he is speaking out publicly about the president's unfitness.

Olivia Troye served on the coronavirus task force in the White House, and she was frustrated with their slow pace. They would hear from medical experts for an hour, and then spend three hours debating how to spin the information rather than how to construct policies that would save lives. What finally pushed her out, though, was the event at Lafayette Square, when the president tear-gassed peaceful protesters in order to clear them out so that he could walk to a church he never entered and hold up a Bible—an empty signal of piety, in the immediate aftermath of silencing ordinary Americans. She held on for a few more weeks, and then resigned as well, also to speak out.

I am telling these stories not to point to the integrity and courage of those who resigned, nor to trash the anonymous functionary who continues doing work that he knows is immoral. I am telling these stories because I think they tell us how to grab onto hope and God's outstretched hand. The guy who doesn't want to sell printer paper isn't desperate enough to see that selling printer paper might be his lifeline. He's not aware of his common humanity with people who are suffering *hard*. He's like Jezebel, or at least one of her staffers, dependent

on a dehumanizing system for his sustenance, and not desperate enough to cut himself off from it in a gamble to live on God's terms. Miles Taylor and Olivia Troye, on the other hand, felt like they were dying, that they could not *live* and keep doing the work they were doing. So they gambled, and threw themselves on the peculiar mercy of God. God is utterly reliable, but not like a biweekly paycheck—more like a big black bird showing up with some food you may or may not find appetizing, more like a chapati or tortilla that'll get you through till tomorrow. But let's not undersell God. Because also when your son, or your central organizing principle in life, collapses, God also brings about life in a new way. This is something a biweekly paycheck or a career path cannot do.

In this story I'm reading that we can be blinded to hope, blinded to God's promises, by the illusion of being separate from one another, the illusion that the suffering of other people has nothing to do with us. That is a costly illusion. It costs you the rich potential of miracles that become possible when we are hospitable, when we live out of a sense of kinship with others.

This president has signed an executive order that will make civil servants vulnerable to political pressures. He has appointed judges who would have been considered unqualified a few years ago. He has probably shared state secrets with our adversaries, and he is deeply in debt to unknown lenders, making himself open to manipulation from those lenders who probably don't have American best interests at heart. He's separated children from their parents. He's run up a record-breaking national debt. He is an existential threat to our democracy, and none of us knows how this election will turn out. But however it turns out, the reality is that God can and will do miracles that at least get us through the night and into the

next day. If we can orient ourselves toward the God whose miracles are peculiar but enough, we can find our way forward.

Miraculous God,

By your power, Elijah provided bread and oil for the widow and her household. By her willingness to take a chance, the widow provided food and water for Elijah. Give us hearts to love one another and to take generous chances, so that in providing and in receiving, we too, may experience your unimaginable and peculiar power, through the one who channeled your life-giving energy, Jesus Christ. Amen.