

Be Still and Know That I Am God "Labor Day"

September 5/6, 2009

Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

Be Still and Know

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(Note: These *Notes* were originally published September 1/2, 2007. Bob re-issues them this weekend to guide our Labor Day reflections.

Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: 1 Kings 19:11-12 read in the context of 1 Kings 18-19; Psalm 46:10; and others.

Introduction

"And he said, 'Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD.' And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. 12 And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. **And after the fire the sound of a low whisper [a still small voice, KJV]**" (1 Kings 19:11-12, ESV).

"Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" 11 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah" (Psalm 46:10-11, ESV).

The first of our chosen texts for this Labor Day weekend is part of a longer narrative, including 1 Kings 18 and 19, which gives two episodes in the life of the prophet Elijah. Read as a unit, juxtaposed to each other, these two stories communicate a powerful message about experiencing the presence of God. The Psalm reading reinforces this theme and supplies the main idea for our study.

What we'd like to accomplish is a careful understanding of the two Elijah's stories and then bring their message to bear on the significance of celebrating "Labor Day". Along the way, we'll pick up some additional Scriptures which both broaden and deepen our understanding. Several themes combine in study:

1. We are invited **to listen intently for God's voice** which is often masked by the excessive "noise" and frenzied activity taking place all around us.
2. We need **to incorporate forms of "rest"** and reflection within our otherwise hurried and busy lives. Even in our work for God (something Elijah knew a great deal about, as we shall see) we may become overloaded with tasks and place far too much emphasis on "outcomes", resulting in the loss of God's voice speaking to us.
3. The evidence of God's presence does not always come from the "big events" of our lives, but often waits **quietly in the day-to-day experiences**, and in the "low whispers."
4. While "labor" is important, the celebration of **God's work in us** is even more valuable to us. That is one reason why we "worship" God, to acknowledge His role in our workweek labors.
5. Both the story of Elijah and the admonition from Psalm 46 **help us arrange our work and worship, our accomplishments and our acknowledgements, our service and our stillness before God.**

Elijah: Man of Action

Elijah lives in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Ahab, the king who "did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him" (1 Kings 16:30). Ahab had married a Phoenician princess named Jezebel who established the cult of Ba'al in the palace and persecuted the Israelite prophets of God. Elijah informs Ahab of God's displeasure with a threat; a drought will ensue until Elijah, on God's behalf, announces the coming rain (ch. 17). Elijah, fleeing the king's wrath, hides in a desert canyon above the Jordan valley. There, he is miraculously fed by ravens until the drought dries up his water supply (17:6). He moves to

Phoenicia, where he and his household, once again, are fed in supernatural fashion. God finally commands Elijah to return to Israel, where he challenges the prophets of Ba'al to the famous contest on Mt. Carmel (ch.18).

The Elijah stories take place early in the prophet's career. We first meet him in 1 Kings 17 where he confronts the pagan religious influences which have grown rampant in northern Israel. Ahab is king, the second ruler in the dynasty of Omri, near the beginning of the 9th century B.C.E. He is a king with baggage in the form of his wife Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of Sidon. 1 Kings 16:29-34 sets the stage for Ahab's reign by specifically describing the kind of worship Jezebel encouraged in Israel: the religion of Baal (notice her father's name, Eth-Baal) and Baal's girlfriend goddess, Asherah. Ahab adopted the worship of this god and goddess, sponsoring sacred sites and erecting idols to them. Baal worship emphasized fertility and the role of Baal in providing rain for crops. His consort, Asherah, had an overtly sexual role, and her rituals included all sorts of deviant activity calculated to coax nature's fruitful harvest. Baal is often called "Rider of the Clouds" in ancient Ugaritic (the language of Canaan) texts. Storms, lightning, thunder and hail were thought to be the work of Baal. For Israel, Baal was a god "besides" Yahweh, not necessarily in place of Him. While Israel still upheld the worship of Yahweh in His general role as powerful deliverer, they considered Baal to be the "detail god" who handled the mundane matters of rain, crops and livestock. And Baal was a "party god" whose rituals included wild orgies and debaucheries odious to Yahweh. Put simply, the worship of Baal was "fun" and exciting, filled with forbidden practices conducted at the "high places" within the "groves" of trees. Jezebel had successfully sold Israel on the widespread adoption of her god and goddess, and Ahab came along for the ride.

Ironically, when Elijah appears in 1 Kings 17, he announces that Yahweh, not Baal, is the true source of rain, and to prove it, he prophesies a drought that will last for three years. And the drought came, and with it intense famine, especially in Ahab's capital city of Samaria (1 Kings 18:2). After three years, Elijah reappears, from an extended exile (where Yahweh took care of him), and seeks an audience with Ahab through the king's steward, Obadiah. This servant of the king was a good man who foiled the efforts of Jezebel to kill all of Yahweh's prophets by hiding one hundred of them in caves. He is, for that reason, reluctant to tell Ahab that "Elijah is here", fearing the king's wrath. With Elijah's assurances, he informs the king who goes out to meet the prophet. This encounter and its sequel builds the plot for the two stories that interest us.

Act One: Shock and Awe

1. Ahab sees Elijah and calls out "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" (18:17)
2. Elijah responds, "No, you are the real troubler because you have ceased following Yahweh and His word and now follow the Baals (referring to Baal and Asherah). (18:18).
3. The prophet then convinces Ahab to send 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah to meet him at Mount Carmel, a "conference" to be witnessed by "all Israel" (18:19).
4. No doubt thinking that Elijah would lift the drought if this condition was met, Ahab agrees, and the meeting takes place soon afterward at **Mount Carmel**.
 - a. Mount Carmel is a coastal mountain range in northern Israel, stretching from the Mediterranean Sea towards the southeast.
 - b. The range is about 4 to 5 miles wide, sloping gradually towards the southwest, but forming a steep ridge on the northeastern face, 1,742 feet high.
 - c. The Jezreel Valley lies to the immediate northeast. The range forms a natural barrier in the landscape, just as the Jezreel Valley forms a natural passageway, and consequently the mountain range and the valley had much impact on migration and invasions through Israel.
 - d. The mountain formation is a mixture of limestone and flint, containing many caves, and covered with several volcanic rocks.
 - e. Due to the lush vegetation on the sloped hillside, and many caves on the steeper side, Carmel became a hideout for criminals
 - f. Carmel was seen as a place for escape from Yahweh according to the Book of Amos (9:3).
 - g. The sloped side of the mountain is covered with luxuriant vegetation, including oaks, pines, olives, and laurels.

5. Once the people are assembled, Elijah speaks to them like a true prophet (18:20):
 - a. How long will you straddle the fence? (18:21)
 - i. If Yahweh is God, follow him.
 - ii. If Baal is God, follow him.
 - b. This appeal reminds us of Joshua challenging Israel to "Choose you this day whom you will serve..." (Joshua 24:15) The difference lies in the seductive way Jezebel had woven Yahweh worship with Baal worship, compromising the latter for the sake of the former. It also reminds us of Jesus' words, "You cannot serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24) This practice of religious compromise is called "syncretism", and is a direct violation of God's command: "You shall have no other gods before (or "besides") me" (Exodus 20:3).
 - c. Elijah receives no answer to his appeal, after all, he tells them, I'm only one prophet taking up Yahweh's cause, while Baal has 450! (18:22).
6. Elijah now arranges a "truth contest", a sort of "trial by ordeal".
 - a. Two bulls are to be brought forward and Baal's prophets are to choose one, while Elijah will take the other one. Notice how Elijah dispels any charge of trickery, allowing others to bring the bulls and to choose first.
 - b. Each group is to cut their respective sacrifice into pieces and place it on the wood, presumably placed on an altar.
 - c. Neither group is to light the fire normally kindled to consume the sacrifice (18:23).
 - d. Then Elijah proposes the critical element in this contest:
 - i. The prophets of Baal are invited to call on their god, while Elijah calls on the name of Yahweh.
 - ii. Whichever god "answers by fire", he is God (18:24).
 - iii. The people answer "It is well spoken", implying that they accept both the method and the proof offered by the contest.
7. Elijah's contest takes place. Elijah invites the "majority" religious party to initiate the contest, and then bides his time.
 - a. The prophets of Baal follow the rules and begin their Baal ritual, calling out to the god whom they believe is responsible for the rain, the crops and the livestock.
 - b. To their cries, "Baal, answer us!" the text tells us: "But there was no voice and no one answered" (18:26). This continues for some three or more hours, and the text describes their "leaping" movements, consistent with what we know about such orgiastic religions which rely on wild dances and exaggerated gyrations to awaken the power of their gods. **Theirs is not the religion of quiet confidence, but the religion of frenzied activity.**
 - c. Elijah wastes no time building his case against Baal. He mocks the prophets, reminding them that Baal is "a god" (18:27). Does Elijah imply that Baal is *only* "a" god and not the true God? No definite article precedes the word for God, *Elohim*, used here, and that may be Elijah's intention. He proceeds to suggest why Baal, this little, puny god, isn't answering them:
 - i. He is in deep thought.
 - ii. He is going to the bathroom.
 - iii. He is taking a trip.
 - iv. He is asleep and you need to wake him up.
 - v. Each of these explanations for Baal's "silence" only reinforces the argument Elijah starts to build, namely, that Baal is not the true God at all, but a poor parody of Him, at best.
 - d. Angered by Elijah's taunts, the prophets intensify their ritualistic choreography (18:29). Now the scene turns ugly. Brandishing lances and swords, they inflict deep wounds on their bodies, releasing "blood", their life source, in expectation that Baal will approve and either drink their bloody offerings or enter their bodies through the wounds. This lunacy continues until twilight when Hebrews ordinarily offered the evening oblation to Yahweh (see Exodus 29:39, 41). Once more, the historian comments: "There was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention" (18:29).

- e. In keeping with the Torah, it was time for the evening offering to Yahweh, and for Elijah a logical reason to end the insane spectacle presented by Baal's prophets. He extends a simple invitation: "Come near to me", which, in the language of Yahweh's prophets, means quite simply, "Come near to Yahweh" (18:30).
- i. Apparently, the altar of Yahweh had not been maintained at Carmel, though it might have been used elsewhere in Israel at that time. Baal worship had apparently taken precedence at this locale. Elijah remedies this, and does so in a powerfully symbolic fashion.
 - ii. He takes twelve stones symbolizing ALL the tribes, not just the northern ones, and raises up the altar "in the name of Yahweh" (18:31-32a). He is building this altar according to long-standing instructions from Torah about the construction of such places of worship, suitable for the daily offerings.
 - iii. Elijah then does a curious thing: he digs a trench around the altar, capable of containing some 2 gallons of fluid. This is followed by the instruction to pour four jars of water over the altar and the wood, a ritual done three times, resulting in an overflow down into the trench. **In effect, Elijah is purposely "handicapping the experiment", creating an environment unsuitable for the kindling of fire, and requiring an even greater show of power from Yahweh (or Baal) (18:32-35).**
 - iv. His obedience to Yahweh's worship schedule is impeccable. Elijah waits until "the time of the offering", around twilight, and then he approaches the altar and prays this prayer: **"O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. 37 Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back" (1 Kings 18:36-37).** Notice the covenant language and Elijah's submission to Yahweh's will, doing everything "at your word". The "answer" he expects is intended, not to glorify Elijah, but to make the solid case that Yahweh is the true God so that Israel might "turn their hearts back" to Him. Considering that Elijah built an altar with 12 stones further reinforces his conviction that ALL of Israel, both north and south, might one day "return to Yahweh". This is a moment of great faith, courage and hope.
 - v. And Elijah's prayer is answered: "Then the fire of Yahweh fell..." (18:38), and none of the handicaps hindered Yahweh's "answer by fire". Down it came, consuming not only sacrifice, but wood, stones, dust, and water (the text says, "licked up the water in the trench"). This was no ordinary fire. This was the presence of Yahweh, the "consuming fire" (Deuteronomy 4:24; 9:3; Isaiah 33:14; Hebrews 12:29).
 - vi. The carefully crafted Elijah-ordeal had its desired effect. With one voice the witnessing crowd of Israelites confessed, "Yahweh, he is God; Yahweh, he is God" (18:39). Baal had been discredited, his prophets shamed, and his hold on Israelite society, at least for the time being, greatly diminished. Seizing the moment, Elijah orders the apprehension of Baal's prophets, without exception. He takes them to the brook Kidron and executes them.
 - vii. Turning to Ahab, he urges him to eat quickly and then to seek shelter in the valley of Jezreel, for rain is coming! In turn, Elijah makes his way to the summit of Carmel where he bows before Yahweh seven times in prayer, each time sending his servant to look for signs of rain. And the rain came, "a great rain" (18:45), and Ahab scarcely makes it to shelter.

Act Two: Stillness and Awe

Once back at the palace, Ahab updates Jezebel on the unfortunate day for her prophets. The reader can almost see her eyes narrow, her lips curl into an angry frown, and her painted nails gouging into her bare arms, drawing blood. Immediately she rushes her messenger to Elijah with the ominous message:

So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." (1 Kings 19:2)

Elijah's response defies everything we know about him on Mount Carmel, the courageous, zealous prophet, cleverly outwitting Baal's prophets, an instrument of the divine judgment on the day the fire fell. But who is this "new" man that we see?

Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. 4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers" (1 Kings 19:3-4).

1. How suddenly Elijah's fortunes have been reversed! God's favorite, the hero of Israel, the worker of miracles who ran before the king's chariot, is now running for his life! Ahab is unwilling or unable to stop his wife, Jezebel.
 - a. Elijah flees to the southern Israelite kingdom of Judah, and then to its southern border, Beersheba (19:3).
 - b. Not wishing to endanger his servant, he leaves him behind as he flees Jezebel's agents into no-man's land, into the desert.
 - c. Elijah prepares to die (19:4-5).
2. On first reading, Elijah is simply saying, "Like my fathers, I too must die." But why these words: "I am no better than my fathers?" Perhaps this phrase betrays what truly bothers Elijah. Before his current troubles, he was better.
 - a. As we see below in v. 10, Elijah understands his privileged position with God. He has served bravely and knows that he is worthy of God's favor. Yet, he is about to die of thirst, alone and abandoned in a nameless wash.
 - b. Surely Elijah deserves better. It is possible that "fathers" refers to the prophets who have preceded him. If so, Elijah's pride is unabashed. "Just as the great men before me have died," he thinks, "so, too, must I."
 - c. As usual, the Bible wastes no words. Elijah is the recipient of yet another miracle. Saved from certain death, he is again God's special one. Sustained by divine dispensation, he travels to Horeb - another name for Sinai. The number forty reminds us of Moses' sojourn on the mountain (19:8).
3. A shocking question! It is God Who saved Elijah and has presumably brought him to this spot, and now God asks Elijah why he is here! (19:9)
 - a. Elijah can only be annoyed. He has miraculously traveled forty days to reach the Mountain of Revelation, the place where Yahweh once revealed Himself to Moses. The Rabbis claimed that the cave Elijah entered was the same "cleft in the rock" (Ex. 33:22) from which Moses saw God!
 - b. Can Elijah expect anything less than his own personal revelation from Yahweh, a meeting with God that would even surpass the supernatural miracles that God has performed for him and through him so far on Mount Carmel?
 - c. He might have mused, at last, like Moses, his faithful service would be rewarded. He would meet God! Instead he is asked by God, "Why are you here?"
 - i. Elijah is frazzled, then disappointed. And then angry.
 - ii. God is closer now than ever. Never before has God engaged Elijah in dialogue. But this question makes no sense.
 - iii. "Of course God knows how I got here; it was God's idea," he thinks. "So God must really be asking why I ran into the desert."
4. This is the same determined Elijah we know so well from previous chapters, the Elijah of righteous anger.
 - a. His response is really a question, "How could You have allowed one who has served You so well to be in so desperate a situation?"
 - b. Elijah takes God's question to be an attack and replies defensively. "I am here because I have been zealous for You!" Elijah has responded with the righteous anger that has characterized his prophetic mission. Justifiably so. "Why is God questioning my motives?" he thinks. "I am the same Elijah that God knows so well." (19:10)

- c. "Finally," Elijah no doubt says to himself as the storm begins. "Now we're getting down to business!" At the great revelation to the Jewish people here (Exodus 19:18), the mountain was covered with smoke as God descended in fire. Mt. Sinai trembled and quaked. (19:11)
 - d. Not only is this the method of revelation Elijah expects, it is also reminiscent of the events on Mt. Carmel. God's fire consumed his sacrifice, and then came the storm that ended the drought.
5. Elijah clings to the cave while God unleashes natural forces far beyond anything Elijah has seen or heard. But even in the midst of the tempest, he realizes that something is terribly wrong. The text announces that God is passing by. The expected natural escorts - wind, earthquake and fire - are present. But as the text repeats to us three times, God is nowhere to be found! (19:11-12)
 6. Nature's upheaval over, Elijah is now able to stand at the entrance of the cave as Moses did before him. Finally, he will see God! So he hides his face in his cloak, for everyone knows that no one can see God directly and live (Ex. 33:20). The revelation to Elijah is not an answer, but a question, the same question he heard before. Now, he must confront it again. "Why are you here, Elijah?" If Elijah was annoyed the first time, we can only imagine his exasperation now. What does God want from Elijah? (19:13)
 7. The Hebrew words for what Elijah hears are: *Qol dmamah daqah*, the "still, small voice." (19:12)
 - a. This translation from the King James Bible is still among the better of the English versions.
 - b. Modern translations, however, render *qol* as a physical sound rather than a metaphorical voice, such as "a tiny whispering sound," "the sound of a light whisper", or the unpoetic "a soft murmuring sound." Perhaps Simon and Garfunkel had it right with their the "sounds of silence"!
 - c. I like Abraham Heschel's literal rendering of *qol dmamah*, "a voice of silence."
 - i. Precedent for such a reading can be found in the book of Genesis, where God says to Cain, "the voice of your brother's blood calls out to me" (Gen. 4:10).
 - ii. Here *qol* is a silent voice rather than an audible sound. And that, I believe, is precisely what Elijah hears: a voice without sound, or a metaphorical but grammatically strict translation, "voice of fragile silence."
 8. The idea of a "fragile" silence may seem strange to one sitting in suburbia, especially since *daqah* means "fine" or "thin." But then, try reading in the desert!
 - a. Not all silences are alike. Put in earplugs or enter a soundproof room and the silence is muggy and oppressive.
 - b. Silence in a forested, mountain wilderness is rare. The wind howls, leaves rustle, birds chirp, insects buzz, creeks "sing." True silence, perhaps on a peak when the wind stops, is actually quite rare. It hits suddenly, with dramatic impact.
 - c. In Israel's deserts and the Sinai, where the wind is usually still for at least half the day, the silence is vastly different.
 - d. If you were in the desert now, and you closed your eyes, and waited for the wind to stop, then this silence would be total, yet light and natural - even embracing. And precious. The smallest movement of an insect or the slightest breeze registers audibly. You hear the ruffling of your sleeve, or the call of a raven miles away. This is desert silence. Easily disturbed. A fragile silence. (19:13)
 9. From this desert silence come words that Elijah hears with his inner ear. The voice asks, "*ma lekha po*, Elijah?" Literally, the sentence reads, "What is for you here, Elijah?" But scholars translate this sentence as an expression, "Why are you here, Elijah?" or "What are you doing here, Elijah?" The reason is clear. For them, the context is "**Sinai-that-is-not-Carmel.**" Why did you come here, Elijah, when your people need you back in Israel? But what if God has a different message for Elijah? What if the context is right here, right now, "Sinai-in-the-desert?" What is for you here, Elijah, in the desert?
 10. No "God-sent fire" as on Mt. Carmel; no crowds to applaud your courage and your miracles. What is here for you in the desert where your righteous anger, so justifiable, gets you nothing? Where you would rather lie down and die than give up your pride, your belief that you really are better or more deserving than your peers and, perhaps, even your fathers. And what is here for you on Mt. Sinai, Elijah, when the

- wind, earthquake and fire bring no revelation? When you are left befuddled in desert silence - expecting to see God's glory, hearing a silent voice; waiting for an affirming answer, getting a shattering question.
11. If we were to translate *ma lekha po* as an expression - in accord with the context of the desert - we would write, "Who are you, here, Elijah?" Who are you in the desert, where your previous understanding of how God communicates with you no longer applies; where your past experience misleads you; where your great accomplishments will not help you? Who are you Elijah, here, in the desert? If we stop to listen in the stillness, this is a question any of us can hear, anytime we walk the desert. We might ask:
- Who am I, when my achievements, titles and bank account are left behind? When all that really matters is whether I can find shade and shelter. When the more possessions I carry on my back, the less chance I have of finding water.
 - Who am I, when the person I have become is a burden I can no longer carry, and the self-image and personality habits I have worked so hard to cultivate in the past, are precisely what might lead me to my death now?
 - When everything nonessential has been shed like a snake's skin, who am I?
12. Being a "prophet" has changed for Elijah. No more dramatic miracles, no more thunderbolts and earthquakes. No Ten Commandments either. **Elijah must now learn his role-model Moses' greatest virtue - humility.** The zealous warrior is given his most difficult mission, to confront his pride and see himself as he truly is. What is for you here, Elijah? Just silence. **Silence in which God has never been so close.**

Reflections on Stillness, Labor and Rest

The world is full of *noise*. As human technology has brought us labor-saving devices, lifting the burden of work, so it has also brought us clamor and disturbance. Phones ring, commercials blare, trucks grind, sirens moan, and combine their sounds with a hundred others. Then, when it would seem that silence finally triumphs, we pick up an earpiece and soak up an MP3 tune--and this voluntarily! Why do we struggle with the quiet? Is it that one set of sounds masks others? Or that external noise suppresses the troubling thoughts racing through our heads? Some of us add our own audio to help us through repetitive and "boring" tasks, as if suffering through monotony in silence pains us far too much.

Of course, not all sound is noise. Harmony, rhythm, orchestration, lilting melodies accompanying catchy words, a baby's coo, the sound of our spouse's car in the driveway--each sound is a sign we welcome. Sounds evoke feelings, recall memories, settle tense nerves, communicate ideas, warn of danger, cheer on our favorites, and reinforce the certainties we hold dear. Loud, soft, high, low, blended, mellow, harsh, muffled, inaudible--flavors of sound, not always to our taste, ready for our audition.

"And God said..." Here's a different sound. At the dawn of creation it amplifies the world into existence, from subatomic particles to whole galaxies, exploding in space where no ear may yet hear, only the mind of God. No one around to be distracted by the "big bang"; only God (and perhaps the angels) who is pleased with the sounds He hears and the ones He makes. "If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?" A playful philosophical puzzle to be sure. God smiles and replies, "I always hear it." "And God saw all that he made and it was good." Including the first sounds made by His creation. God knows the silence. And he knows the sounds. Do we?

The world is also full of *frenzied activity* at breathtaking speed. "What's happening?" We're always up to something. Scarcely a moment left empty, as if time were a vacuum siphoning new tasks. "Slave to his work", a spouse complains. "Too busy", yet another grumbles. Strangely, labor-saving inventions create stolen opportunities. No sooner are we "free from this" than we are "committed to that". How much labor is actually rewarded? How much work is its own reward? Or, do we ever take satisfaction in what we do? Again, some helpful insight from a biblical text, this time Genesis 2:

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. 2 And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation (Genesis 2:1-3).

So, was God tired? It's a natural question and children have asked it innocently enough. Theologically He can't be tired, but then again, the God, who makes the whole universe by His words, still had reason to pause and celebrate the work He had finished. Repeatedly, in the Genesis text, we hear words like "finished" and "had done". For God, the labor of Creation reaches a point of completion. And what does God do? "He rested on the seventh day", "He rested from all his work", and "he made it holy"--that is the day of rest.

Time to create. Time to cease creating. Time to begin managing and enjoying what one has made. The Hebrew words used to describe "rest" point directly to the *Sabbath* (or Hebrew: *Shabbat*). Literally, the word means "to cease", and this is consistent with its use in Genesis. Once "finished" God could stop creating. **Implied is the satisfaction of God with his work, a sort of cosmic joy over His achievement.** God established a "day" for reflecting on all of this, and this "seventh day" falls at the end of the creational week. No need for more feverish work. No need to fling one more galaxy into being, or rearrange a constellation, or make one more sun shine still brighter. God's wisdom assures Him, and he confidently ascends His heavenly throne, reigning over all the works of His hands. He proclaims the seventh day "Holy", from the Hebrew *qadosh*, **the act of setting something apart from its ordinary use and putting it to a special use.** Surely creating the world in six days was unprecedented! Why make the seventh day more special still? Is it more holy than the six? Yes, declares God, **for the seventh vindicates the six and proclaims them successful!** This is how work and labor ought to be. Not the frenzied, half-finished tasks which consume human life and wear out human beings. But the sort of labor marked by **assurance that it has reached its goal** (Hebrew for "finished", *kalah*, "complete", "spent"). No wonder God sets apart the seventh day as "holy", for there can be no greater day than the one which declares the other six as "complete".

Sabbath is the signature of God on time. To human beings He entrusts the continuing labor made possible by Creation. "I'm finished", God tells His creation partner, the human being, "But your work is just beginning!" And throughout the generations of human history, the chronicle of human labor unfolds, not all of its achievements stamped by the blessing of the Sabbath, however. For not every activity consuming the week finds its blessing at week's end. Much human labor seems always incomplete, leaving its workers without the divine affirmation, the divine signature. To work and to have the sense of completeness; to labor and derive satisfaction from the deed; to expend effort and feel blessed when the sun goes down--these are not gifts human beings can give themselves. We must wait for the familiar call of the Creator God, "Finished", "Blessed", and "Holy".

Troubled by the lack of satisfaction with life's efforts, the writer of Ecclesiastes waxed philosophical. Work was important to him, since his book contains numerous references to it. **His greatest fear is that all his achievements will come to nothing**, or as he liked to express it, "to vanity". His experience contrasts with God's in Genesis 2. A few texts illustrate this point:

I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. 5 I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. 8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the children of man. 9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. 10 And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. 11 **Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all**

was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun
(Ecclesiastes 2:4-11)

So I saw that there is nothing better than that **a man should rejoice in his work**, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him? (Ecclesiastes 3:22)

For the Wisdom writer, it simply wasn't enough to expend energy and mark achievements. He certainly was a busy fellow! Had we asked him, "What have you been up to lately?" he could have easily answered us. But had we asked him, "How do you feel about your accomplishments?" his reply would have been depressing: "I find no satisfaction in my work." Our natural query would no doubt be, "Then why bother?" Indeed, why bother? **Satisfaction with our work is a gift from God**. It comes from knowing **we have a partnership with the Creator**, who entrusts us with His ongoing work. Nothing we do must be fractured from the larger purposes of God for His world. The moment we embrace a task as our own project, and then throw ourselves into the fray, we cease to be creators and become mere workers. And there will be no Sabbath for us in such labor. We become slaves instead.

It's interesting to read the rationale for keeping Sabbath found in the second reading of the so-called "Ten Commandments" found in Deuteronomy:

Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. 15 **You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day** (Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

Slaves. Were we to ignore the need for Sabbath, we place ourselves back in Egypt in a place where human beings were chattel, merely instruments in the hands of Pharaoh to build his cities. **Imagine the view of time held by a slave**. Days merge into days without distinction. Night is the only solace, the only rest and it is passed subconsciously in sleep. No seventh day to reflect or to be satisfied. Is it any wonder that God gave the Sabbath to Israel? It was His gracious gift, lifting the burden of unremitting labor, the toil of unrequited work. No wage, no rest, no satisfaction. These are the core values of the slave without Sabbath. No wonder Jesus took issue with the religious interpretation placed on Sabbath by his contemporaries. They wanted to enforce Sabbath keeping as if it were work and mere obligation! To which our Lord replied:

"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

This connection between Sabbath, work and human salvation receives additional explanation in the book of Hebrews. In that New Testament book, the writer argues consistently that the Old Testament rituals find complete fulfillment in Jesus. He says, in effect, come to Jesus for the things you formerly sought in the sacraments of the Torah. And so, he says things like, Jesus is our High Priest, and Jesus shed his blood to forgive our sins. Sabbath is no exception. Jesus brings Sabbath to a new level not possible before by simply seeing it as a mandatory observance, one day out of seven. Consider this passage:

Therefore, while **the promise of entering his rest** still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. 2 For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. 3 For **we who have believed enter that rest**, as he has said, "As I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest," although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. 4 For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works." 5 And again in this passage he said, "They shall not enter my rest." 6 Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter

because of disobedience, 7 again he appoints a certain day, "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." 8 For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. 9 **So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, 10 for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.** 11 **Let us therefore strive to enter that rest,** so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience (Hebrews 4:1-11)

Enter the rest of God, the writer seems to be saying here. Let His rest become yours. Let that sense of completeness he felt when the six days of creation had reached their climax become your sense of completeness. "...whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his". Such is the Sabbath of salvation made possible through accepting the gift of God's grace found in Jesus. These words no doubt struck a chord with their first readers. The adherents of Second Temple Judaism (the sort of Judaism practiced by the contemporaries of Jesus) leaned heavily on the notion that they needed to impress God with their "works", their "accomplishments", in order to coerce His forgiveness and set them free from their long exile. Torah had ceased to be the gracious gift of God's Word. It had become a burdensome collection of tedious obligations strictly imposed on an already over-burdened nation. It was unable to liberate them from onerous work, but instead placed more labor on their shoulders. **It had become religion, not relationship.**

However, the writer to the Hebrews tells his readers something quite different: "Look! God has offered us a new way to experience His Sabbath! Through Jesus, our source of salvation, we are invited into relationship with the Creator God. Our vain labors can cease. Our endless striving for His favor can come to an end. God offers us this 'rest' as His promise. If we are to 'strive' for anything, it is, ironically, the 'rest' He freely offers us!" By means of these assuring words, Hebrews calls it readers away from the old way of being the people of God and to the new way. In this, the message is quite consistent with what Jesus communicated to his followers, using these familiar words that now take on a new significance for us:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

Our culture frequently defines people in terms of their achievements. "What can you do? What have you done? What do you do?" Human activity remains, for our time, what it was for the ancients: a mark of identity. Success or failure in work is its own "labor". Remarkable people and "self-made men" fascinate us. Our civil religion offers salvation in the form of such achievement. Reality media elevates the "star". And so our generation "strives", not unlike its Ecclesiastes counterpart, "I made great works" (2:4), only to awaken one morning with the sinking feeling, "all was vanity and striving after the wind". For such persons, Jesus has come. In our work, says Jesus, we do not labor alone, but with him, under his "yoke". The "rest" he offers, is the simple fact of his presence with us in our labor. Because Jesus has become a human being, he simultaneously shares our human situation, including our work. He eagerly supplies "rest" for our "souls" when the weariness of our bodies is unavoidable. His yoke is "easy", not because life's labor suddenly loses its difficulty, but because he shares it with us.

With Jesus sharing our "yoke", labor loses its meaninglessness, work is no longer vain. Purpose lifts the burden. But this is no ordinary purpose for it involves being in the very presence of God and knowing He remains at work "in us". True Sabbath is a Christian value. It means we find significance in our work precisely because we have taken up the cause of God in doing it. In our work, God is present and active. Believing *that* requires great faith, to be sure. But we must own this fact each day. Not only on the seventh day, but every day we must keep "Sabbath". What does that mean in practical terms? It means allowing the Creator God who has given us His salvation-rest in Jesus, His greatest work, to put the signature of His presence on our lives each day. It means allowing Him to "make holy" all of our daily tasks as we offer ourselves to Him for His service. It means rejecting the notion that "small tasks" are unimportant or that otherwise routine work is dull or boring. Once we "see our work" in light of God's Greater Work, all of life's tasks acquire a sacredness.

Martin Luther, the great reformer, once wrote a commentary on the following Psalm:

Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways! 2 **You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you** (Psalm 128:1-2).

Luther remarked: "Your work is a very sacred matter. God delights in it, and through it he wants to bestow his blessing on you." Not merely work, but "vocation", "calling". That's quite different than the perspective of our activity-driven culture, filled with busyness, but impoverished of meaning. How is it that Luther can speak of God's delight in **our** work? What makes his perspective so radically different from that of Ecclesiastes? Oddly, the writer of that book came painfully close to the answer in his last chapter where he declared "Remember your Creator..." (Ecclesiastes 12:1) This is a call to place "work" (and all other things, for that matter) in the context of God's creative purposes. When God made the world, He was clearly "up to something", for He did not make it for nothing, He did not form it "in vain". Luther knew what Jesus taught: "My Father is working and I am working" (John 5:17).

And this work "is not in vain". St. Paul, in his magnificent treatment of the resurrection, proclaims the fulfillment of God's creative purposes through the resurrection, first of Jesus, and then of his people. His sweeping and majestic summary of God's future includes the vision of a world completely restored to the purposes of God. He concludes this dramatic exposition with these words:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in **the work of the Lord**, knowing that in the Lord **your labor is not in vain** (1 Corinthians 15:58).

This is, of course, a sharp contrast to the perception of Ecclesiastes where human labor is always on the brink of losing its meaning, and where the writer consistently calls human effort "vain". From this assessment by Paul, we ought to take heart as Christians, doing the "work of God" in our ordinary lives. Shaped by our belief in God's new Sabbath, wrapped up in the person of Jesus, the author of the New Creation, we have a fresh outlook on the nature of our work. As Paul expresses it:

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ (Colossians 3:23-24).

From slavery to work, Jesus, our Lord, has emancipated us. No slave works "heartily". No slave expects an "inheritance". But from "the Lord Christ" we expect both, for to him we direct our service. Saved not "by works" but by God's grace, we freely offer our work to the one who saved us.

And God's latest work is the building up of His people. Echoing the words of the Psalmist, we consider:

Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it **labor in vain** (Psalm 127:1).

Energized by this, we embrace even more fervently our own work within the household of God. Again, Paul:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 **not a result of works**, so that no one may boast. 10 For **we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works**, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Among the highest aspects of our vocation (calling) is our participation as craftsmen in Jesus' faith community. Paul uses the collective "we" when he writes about that community, the Church, the people of God. We are **God's building**, while at the same time, we are **coworkers with God** in its construction:

For we are **God's fellow workers**. You are God's field, **God's building**. 10 According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. 11 For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw- 13 **each one's work will become manifest**, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will **test what sort of work each one has done**. 14 If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire (1 Corinthians 3:9-15).

This is obvious serious work, with serious consequences. But this should not discourage us or make us afraid. We ought to rejoice that so serious a vocation has been given to us, a work with meaning that survives into eternity, even though it passes through the fire. Paul uses common language for metallurgic testing: fire is not intended to destroy what is real, only to purify it. That is how important our work is to God: He wants it to be the best, the purest. Inevitably (and this should encourage us), the final judgment of our work's value lies with God. Others may fail to appreciate its worth or may even feel threatened by what it achieves. None of this matters to the follower of Jesus who watched his own Master pass through suffering and death, and then arrive on the other side in glory and power. Our work is measured, in the end, by the Lord. From Him it receives its true evaluation.

Final Thoughts

"Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). We began our study with assorted thoughts about silence and noise and now we turn to this Psalm. The sort of "stillness" implied by the Hebrew word use here, *rapah*, is far from delicate. It's more like our impatience with a noisy child: "Quiet!", "Enough, already!", or "Relax!", "Chill!" Spoken to an otherwise frenzied and turbulent world, this is really a command to "cease and desist" because God is about to make Himself known. All human projects and agendas go into abeyance when God shows up. In the larger context of the Psalm, this makes complete sense. "The nations rage, the kingdoms totter" (vs.6), but then God speaks and they all melt away. After all, the Psalmist reminds us, God is present "in our midst", and He has a great deal to tell us. And so we must be quiet so we can hear Him. We are called to see, not our own works, writes the Psalmist, but "the works of the Yahweh" who brings all human work to a halt. Yahweh declares Sabbath (this is the Hebrew for the word "cease" in vs.9) over all wars for national dominion so that He might be earth's rightful King (vs.9-11). He is God and we are not. This is the true meaning of Sabbath and a timely guide for our Labor Day reflections.

We hear Isaiah write in similar ways:

For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, "In returning ["retreat"] and rest ["descent"] you shall be saved; in quietness ["silence"] and in trust shall be your strength" (Isaiah 30:15).

An Israelite warrior would take issue with Isaiah who uses the Hebrew words for "retreat" and "descent" (as from a mountain top) in conjunction with "deliverance". Moreover the prophet counsels silence and dependence for the strong warrior. None of this makes much sense to the person of pure action. Yet, such are the ways of God. Even in hard work, there must be retreat. And dependence on God, coupled with a willingness to hear Him speak, is the true workman's strength. And his true **worship**. This is what Isaiah is actually saying, however counter-intuitive it seems. His words are supported by those of Jeremiah who wrote during painful times for God's people as chronicled in his book of Lamentations:

It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD (Lamentations 3:26).

Or consider Habakkuk:

But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him (Habakkuk 2:20).

Hard words for a warrior or a worker to hear, that somehow letting down one's guard or letting go of one's own plans could somehow result in any kind of achievement. Yet this is wholly consistent with how God "works". The way up is down; the last is first. Even for the driven worker or the determined warrior:

The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

But they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint (Isaiah 40:31).

This was, of course, the powerful message Elijah discovered. When fire fell on Mount Carmel and devoured his sacrifice and licked up the water in the trenches around the altar, our beloved prophet imagined he had seen Yahweh at His best. What he did not expect was the fearsome wrath of Queen Jezebel who put him to flight. Outflanked in his own mind by this mighty patron of the god Baal whose prophets Elijah had slain, he assumed that all was lost, and that he alone remained in Israel devoted to Yahweh. No quietness here. No confidence

and strength either. After all, Elijah's God appeared in fire and certain judgment on His enemies. Now sulking in the little cave beneath the famous Mount Sinai where God once gave Torah to Moses amid fire and smoke, Elijah wishes his own death. As if to mock his lack of faith, Yahweh sends successively, wind, earthquake and fire, yet this time, in none of these, does Elijah sense the presence of God. Then as if after a dramatic pause, the prophet strains his ears **to hear a low whisper, a quiet voice, a voice of silence**, sufficient to draw him to the mouth of the cave. It is God speaking, asking him why he is there. Elijah's answers strain credulity in light of his recent experience on Carmel. None of this has the same pyrotechnics of his Carmel encounter. Rather, Elijah receives the gentle reminder that in the midst of his work, he must never assume that the ways of God look like his own, or that God always acts in the same way each time. The "still, silent whisper" Elijah hears in the cave at Sinai, is quite different from the loud, frenzied activity on Carmel. "Be still, and know that I am God". Amen.

Digger Deeper: *Be Still and Know That I Am God*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of what it means, in the midst of our work, to be quiet and listen for the voice of God, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the notes at the **Connect** desk. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Begin your reading with 1 Kings 19:11-12. In what ways does Elijah **not** "hear" God speak? How **does** the prophet hear God's voice?
2. Now turn your attention to the larger context of these verses, chapters 18 and 19 of 1 Kings, and read the two Elijah stories in their entirety. Think of these chapters as **two dramatic acts**.
Act One (1 Kings 18:17-46): What would you call it?
Describe the "excitement" level in this act
Describe Elijah's level of confidence.
Contrast the two ways "God" is approached, first by the Baal worshippers and then by Elijah.
What was the outcome of this act? How should Elijah have felt about it?
Act Two (1 Kings 19:1-18): What would you call it?
How does the mood change in this act?
Again, describe Elijah's level of confidence?
How does he react to the new circumstances? Where does he go and why?
What does God do to teach Elijah about the relationship between "mighty works" and "stillness"?
Explain the key verses: 19:11-12. In what sense was God "not in" the various natural occurrences?
How did he speak to Elijah? What do you think this means?
3. Read Psalm 46, paying special attention to verses 10-11. What specific instruction is the reader given in verse 10?
 - a. What sorts of "loud" activities are described in the Psalm? Who is responsible for "quieting things down"? List some specific ones the Psalmist mentions. Why are we asked to be "still"?
 - b. What information does the Psalmist provide the reader about "who God is?" In what ways does the Psalm teach us the relationship between what God does and what we should do in response?
4. Read both Genesis 2:1-3 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15. Now compare these passages with Hebrews 4:1-11.
 - a. After God makes the world, what does He do? What do you think this meant for God?
 - b. Why did God give Sabbath to Israel (refer to the Deuteronomy passage).
 - c. Six days of work are followed by the seventh day. Do you think this is only an accident of human culture? What role does a "personal Sabbath" have in our weekly schedule? What sort of things should happen during it?
 - d. Do you think Sabbath is only about one day in seven, or does it have a wider application, as the Hebrews passage explains? In what sense is "salvation" a "rest" from labor?
5. Read Ecclesiastes 2:4-11. Although the writer accomplished many things, what was his greatest surprise? Compare this with Ecclesiastes 3:22: what did he long for in the midst of all his work?
6. Read Matthew 11:28-30. What wonderful promises does Jesus offer to those who "labor"? Compare this with 1 Corinthians 15:58. What hope does Paul offer in the midst of our work?
7. Carefully read and meditate on the following passages. What does each one teach about work and rest?
 - a. Isaiah 30:15
 - b. Lamentation 3:26
 - c. Habakkuk 2:20