

Puzzles

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Scripture: 2 Kings 1:2-17a

Sermon

I don't trust people who think they have God figured out. People like that kind of scare me. Something isn't right with them. I mean it.

How can any of us puny little human beings ever think we have God figured out?! God is the mind that dreamed up the universe. God is the muscle that built the universe. God is the law that runs the universe. God is the love that preserves the universe.

You and I? We're just specks, every last one us. And some of us think we have God figured out? That's total nonsense.

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Sure, sure. God has spoken to us. Spoken to us through prophets and apostles. Spoken to us through Scripture. Spoken to us, especially, through Jesus. But we don't have the prophets and apostles figured out. Not really. They still puzzle us. And we don't have Scripture figured out. There's always more to be discovered.

And we sure don't have Jesus figured out. If we think we do, we're wrong. And if we act like we do . . . Then we're like James and John, who wanted to destroy a Samaritan village.

MAYBE YOU REMEMBER THAT STORY. It's in Luke 9. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. And these villagers don't want to welcome him. So James and John figure it's time to take a page from Elijah's story. They ask Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to burn them up?"

What the . . . ? Who do they think they are? Who do they think Jesus is? And what do they think is going on all around them and in front of them? They don't have a clue! Of course not. They're just puny human beings. Like you. Like me. But they think they have God figured out. And they think they have Jesus figured out. That's when they get kind of scary.

WE JUST LISTENED TO THAT PAGE FROM ELIJAH'S STORY. And it's scary, don't-mess-with-God scary. It's also full of puzzles. Ahaziah the king is a puzzle. Elijah the prophet is a puzzle. And God is a puzzle.

The king is a puzzle because he's so human. He's a perfect example of how forgetful human beings are, of how we never seem to learn. By now, hasn't Ahaziah heard and seen enough to know that there is a god in Israel? That god is the Lord. The Lord, just and faithful. The Lord, strong and mighty. The Lord, gracious and compassionate.

But Ahaziah ignores the Lord. Instead he reaches outside of Israel to one of the made-up gods of the Philistines. "O great Baal-zebul, tell me: will I recover from my injury?" Baal-zebul? Really? That's where you turn for help? To a god who has eyes but can't see, ears but can't hear, feet but can't walk? What fools we are!

I LOVE THIS SCENE NEAR THE END OF *THE WIZARD OF OZ*. Dorothy and her three friends are standing before the "great and powerful Oz." They have served the wizard faithfully. The Wicked Witch of the West has been destroyed. And now they've come to claim what the wizard promised them.

But all they get is fire and smoke and rage. All they get is the wizard scaring them out of their wits again. Until Dorothy's little dog Toto goes behind the curtain. Then, all of a sudden, the jig is up. The wizard is a fake. His promises are worthless.

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How many wizards haven't we served? Phony wizards who have never done us any good? A gang leader maybe. Or a preacher. A favorite bottle. Or a needle. A father maybe. Or a girlfriend. And how many times haven't we gone back, never learning our lesson? We can say it's sin. And it is. We can say it's foolishness. And it is. But it's still a puzzle. Just like Ahaziah, who reaches out to Baal-zebul.

THEN THERE'S ELIJAH; HE'S A PUZZLE, TOO. Sometimes Elijah is footloose and funny. He's a standup comedian on Mt. Carmel. He mocks Baal without mercy. "Shout louder!" he tells the prophets. "Maybe your god is asleep, and you have to wake him up. Shout even louder! Maybe he's out of the country. Ha!"

Sometimes Elijah is full of emotion, and it spills over. When Jezebel puts out a contract on him, Elijah is ready to give up. And he doesn't keep that a secret. He pours out his heart to the Lord in prayer: "Lord, I've had enough. Just take my life. I'm the only prophet left, and my life isn't worth a shekel."

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This time we meet a different Elijah again. He's calm and cool, even closed off. When he speaks to the messengers Ahaziah sent to Baal-zebub, Elijah himself is almost invisible.

After that, we find him alone on top of a hill. He just sits there. When troops come to escort him to the king, Elijah doesn't betray any emotion, or humor. And he doesn't actively call fire down from heaven. No; he just makes room for it, to verify his identity as a man of God. Then he does it again. And it's all matter-of-fact.

SO WHO IS ELIJAH? Is he a comedian? Is he a depleted, defeated soul? Or is he a hitman, who says the word and one hundred three people wind up dead? Who is Elijah? His name offers a clue.

"My God is Yhwh/My God is the Lord." That's what the name "Elijah" means. And that points to a constant feature about Elijah. In a world where the Lord has largely been forgotten, in a world given over to false gods, to phony wizards, in that world, Elijah is sold out to the Lord.

That's just what we want to be, too. Whether we're on the inside or on the outside, we want to be sold out to the Lord. We want to be free from false gods and phony wizards.

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Elijah is sold out to the Lord. And the constant feature about Elijah is this: the Lord speaks and Elijah listens; the Lord commands and Elijah obeys. In tonight's story, the king commands and the king demands. Yet Elijah says, "No." But when the angel of the Lord tells him, "Go." Elijah says, "Yes."

"My God is Yhwh." That's Elijah's name. And that's probably as close as we get to an explanation for the puzzle of Elijah.

THIS LEAVES US WITH THE LAST PUZZLE, THE PUZZLE OF GOD HIMSELF. I'm reading a book now called *Who Is Jesus?* One point the author hammers home is this. We don't begin to understand Jesus until we begin to understand God. And we don't begin to understand God until we grapple with God's holiness.

With God, holiness is something more than justice and fairness and cleanness. With God, holiness is "otherness." God is always other. God is always apart. Never, ever can we contain God inside our temples. Never, ever can we contain God inside our concepts and our doctrines. God is other, always apart.

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At the burning bush, Moses asks for God's name. He's looking for a handle that captures God's essence. But God won't be captured. God says, "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be." Basically God is saying, "Forget it, Moses. You can't sum me up in a name. Any name for me has to be open-ended. The only way to find out who I am is to follow me."

From there at the bush, Moses follows. He follows the command of God into Egypt. And for forty years after that, he follows the cloud and the fire of God through the wilderness, all the way to the edge of the Promised Land.

The journey of God's people has continued ever since. And little by little, God's people have discovered something of who the Lord is.

WHO IS THE LORD? The Lord is the God:

- who created all life and who destroyed it,
- who called Abraham and who demanded Isaac,
- who delivered Israel and who destroyed the firstborn of Egypt,
- who gave the Law and who split the earth open to swallow up the rebels,
- who filled the Temple and who abandoned it,
- who spoke through the prophets and who fell silent,
- who lived in human flesh and who lay dead in a tomb,
- who poured out the Holy Spirit and who struck down Ananias and Sapphira,
- who gave birth to one church and who let it shatter into pieces,
- who forgives sinners and who judges everyone according to their deeds.

On the journey, through the ages, we have discovered a lot about who God is. But we still haven't figured God out. How could we? God is holy. God is other. In other words, God is not available to us for figuring out. God is, and God remains, a puzzle: holy and awesome, faithful and true.

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Yes, God has made himself known in Jesus. (Hallelujah!) But Jesus, too, is a puzzle: sometimes gentle, sometimes harsh; sometimes wide, sometimes narrow. Jesus, too, is beyond figuring out.

And I don't think we would want it any other way. Because any god that puny little human beings could figure out would hardly be worthy of worship. But we do worship God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We worship God as if our lives depended on it. And they do. We worship God because we have figured out this much at least: The Lord is God, and we are not.

Now, that's not everything. But it is a place to start. And every journey starts some place, including our journey with God.

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Glory and thanks be to God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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