Since earliest childhood, when my father read the Bible to us at the dinner table, the story of Elijah at Mount Carmel has bothered me (I Kings 18 and 19). I thought, even as a child, that Elijah’s killing of the false prophets was wicked and indefensible. I felt that he had prostituted religion by taking into his own hands what was safe only in God’s.

So I had to preach on my own doubts. When I used the principle of Event and Interpretation, I discovered (at least for my own I-Thou give and take) that “The point of the contest on Mt. Carmel is that one religion is not so good as another. Religious differences do matter. The God of Israel is not just one God among many . . . so, ‘How long will you go limping between two opinions? If Yahweh is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.’ I don’t think we understand the Old Testament until we see that it was written to show that religion is not a smörgåsbord, choosing a little of this and that.

“But it is dangerous and idolatrous to assume from this that we have the inside track and must defend God. I shudder to think of the things people have done in the name of God. Witness Calvin in Geneva conspiring Servetus’ death, or Cotton Mather and the ‘witches’ of Salem. In Elijah’s case he was not content to let God conclude the contest. He wiped out his enemies. He couldn’t trust God to deal with enemies; he wanted neat solutions. He wanted to prove the superiority of his God . . . to show Him off, make Him incontestable, have Him act as any decent God should. A lot of us end up like Elijah!

“At long last God came to Elijah: ‘not in the wind, nor in the earth-quake, not in the fire. After all these came a still, small voice . . . .’ This voice is not conscience, which depends so much on what it is tuned in to. The still, small voice says to us, as it did to Elijah, as it did to Abraham and Jeremiah, ‘What are you doing here?’ It chides us for our deafness to God’s footsteps now, and makes us forego self-pity and quiet desperation. Abraham Lincoln, that lonely man, said to those who were sure of their answers, ‘With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right . . . let us . . . .’

“The Bible comes alive when you question it, and are not content to brush the questions aside by saying, ‘Have faith!’ For faith starts a journey, a not knowing whither, but only knowing with Whom.”

We have to tease the text, carry on a conversation in depth with Scripture, sit where our congregations sit daily, look at it from the point of view of the sceptic in us as well as the sceptics in and out of the church. There is nothing worse than assuming that we tell the old, old story as if there was no new word from the Lord.

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