

The Old Buffalo Bull Sermon

Gene Miller

Aug. 9, 2009

Several years ago, our family took a summer vacation in Yellowstone Park. One of our excursions in the park was to the small geyser basin at West Thumb, which is along the southwestern edge of Yellowstone Lake. While walking along the boardwalks amongst the hot springs and small geysers, we came upon a buffalo that was lying down next to the boardwalk — in fact, we would have had to have gotten close enough to touch him if we were to pass by. A park ranger happened to be there and he warned us not to get that close to a wild buffalo, and we were only too happy to comply. They are after all really big even when they are lying down.

But we wondered why this buffalo was here when the buffalo herd was some 20 or 30 miles north and east in the Hayden Valley. Not to mention that it was the mating season and buffalos are herd animals anyway. So to find this buffalo alone and far away from the herd when the other buffalo were deeply intent on making merry, or perhaps Susie, as the case may have been, was pretty striking to me. The park ranger explained to us that the bull we were seeing was an old buffalo bull — too old, to put it into the vernacular, “to cut the mustard.” So he was just spending the rest of his days alone in his tattered coat, no longer relating to his buffalo herd or his buffalo dreams. He would likely stay that way until he died.

That old buffalo has stayed with me. For some reason, he reminds me of the story of the Old Testament prophet Elijah. If you're not familiar with the story of Elijah, it's found in the book of I Kings. Elijah was a man of power and vision — a man not to be trifled with. When he first appears in I Kings 17, he doesn't mess around: he tells

Ahab, King of Israel, that there wasn't going to be any rain or even any dew until he gives the word. This was Yahweh's punishment upon Israel because Ahab and the Israelites were messing about with idol worship and strange women, not the least of whom was a Phoenician princess named Jezebel, who had become Ahab's queen. So there was a drought for a long time.

Elijah did a bunch of miracles to show the people that Yahweh was on his side, not Ahab's. They're recorded I Kings 17 and the first part of I Kings 18. Of course, Ahab and his wife Jezebel weren't pleased with all these demonstrations of power, as such demonstrations were seen as threats to their god, who is identified as Baal.

Elijah's challenges to the Baal worshippers culminates in an exhilarating "King of the Mountain" battle, as recorded in I Kings 19. "We'll go to your holy mountain, Mt. Carmel", Elijah says, "And we'll have it out. If you win, we'll all worship Baal. If I win, we'll all worship Yahweh." So Ahab and the 450 prophets of Baal answer the challenge and repair to the summit of Mt. Carmel with Elijah. The actual challenge is to build an altar, slay a bull and put it on the altar as a sacrifice, and then to ask their respective deities to send down fire to consume the sacrifice. The 450 prophets go first. They built their altar, put the bull on it, and started singing, dancing and praying. They started in the morning. By noon, nothing had happened yet, and Elijah began to make fun of them. "Maybe Baal is busy. Cry louder. Maybe he's on a trip. Cry louder." And the prophets sang and danced and prayed all day and nothing happened.

When evening came, Elijah said "OK, now it's my turn. You fellows in your craziness have knocked my altar to pieces. So I'm going to build a new one." And he did. And he dug a trench around it. And he arranged wood on the top of the altar. And

he killed the bull, dismembered it, and arranged the pieces on the wood on top of the altar.

Then he soaked the whole thing with four jars of water, not once but three times. The jars were apparently large enough that the water not only soaked the bull, the wood and the altar, but filled up the trench he had dug around the base of the altar.

Then he prayed to Yahweh, asking that he let the people know who the real God was. And Yahweh answered: fire fell from heaven, consuming not only the water-soaked wood and the sacrificial bull, but lapping up the water in the trench around the altar. Well, there was no question who won that round. But Elijah wasn't done yet: he took the 450 prophets of Baal and killed them all, singlehandedly. Then he prayed for the drought to be lifted, and told Ahab to beat it home before it rained. So Ahab beat it home, and the rain came in torrents. The account doesn't make clear whether he got home before the rain started or not.

Of course, Ahab had to tell Jezebel how things had turned out, and it understates the matter considerably to say that she was not pleased. She took the matter especially personally because Baal was her tribal deity. She sent a message to Elijah: "Mark my word: by this time tomorrow, you're dead."

So what does Elijah do in the face of this enraged Phoenician queen? It's a little surprising, considering what he has just accomplished: he turns tail and runs. He runs south out of Samaria. He runs all the way south through Judah to the extreme southern end, the town of Beersheba. He ditches his servant there in Beersheba and runs further south for another day out into the desert. There, he crawls under a juniper bush and

hides. Then he prays to Yahweh, and this is what he says: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.”

Isn't this a curious turn of events? Why should a man so befriended by Yahweh that he could call down fire from heaven and kill 450 men singlehandedly be so afraid of a mortal queen that he runs away and wants to die? What's going on here?

Let me suggest that what is going on is something that sometimes happens to us men on our journeys. Just when we are at the seeming pinnacle of our powers, our achievements and our accomplishments, everything turns to ashes. Like Elijah, we wonder “What's the point? Have I really done anything worth doing?”

This is a struggle that we may face again and again as we age and as our powers diminish. Each loss of power summons the darkness all over again. This is the time when we're most vulnerable to such things as bright red Corvettes, sleek Harley-Davidsons, plastic surgery and trophy wives. We think they give us that old sense of accomplishment again. Those are also the things that make us the butt of jokes and scorn, because everyone else can see the desperation we're trying to disguise. And this despair is real. And it can be very deep. Such despair is not to be dismissed with a flippant comment or joke. For some reason, it hits us white American males particularly hard: while the rates of suicide among the elderly are higher than the rest of the population, the rate of suicide among elderly men far outstrips that of elderly women.

This dark time for us men can also be a hard time for the women who love us. Many times, they have finished their work around home and hearth and are on their way out into the world, only to meet their men coming back in from the world, wanting the closeness of home and hearth that the women are leaving behind. “What are you doing

here? Where is the go-getter I used to know?” they might say. And sometimes they forget what they know and start saying things like “Oh, men are such babies!” and “Men just want their mommies...”, when they really know deep down that there is a profound difference between mothering and nurturing and that everyone regardless of age or gender needs nurturing during difficult times.

The story of Elijah, a man who was accustomed to projecting power in the world in the way that we men do, can be a guiding story of how we men can proceed when we find our achievements turning to ashes before us, as happened with Elijah. Let’s see where the story takes us.

Elijah is hiding in the desert under a juniper bush and asking Yahweh to let him die. This is the painful picture of a man at the very height of his career turning and running away because he felt he was, in his own words, “no better than my fathers” — a statement filled with darkness and despair because the narratives show plainly that Elijah was much greater than his fathers. Can you name Elijah’s father? Neither can I.

The first thing to note from Elijah’s story is that it deals with his crisis as a spiritual crisis. Elijah’s solution doesn’t lie in changing careers or getting some new toys or drinking wine or taking pills to ease the pain. Elijah’s struggle is a spiritual quest, and since it is a spiritual quest, a spiritual answer must be sought. This is especially important to us because we moderns tend to describe disorders in purely physical terms, forgetting about the spiritual side that we nevertheless all have and whose aid is essential to healing. Not curing, but healing.

The first thing Elijah has done in this story is to remove himself to the desert. He needs the isolation and purification of the desert, so that all extraneous things can fall

away and he can concentrate on the task at hand. Native literatures are full of stories of men of power who sought the purification that is available only when our external lives are reduced to our simplest needs. And even Carl Jung, whose first intimation of mortality was the death of his mother, found that he needed to work with his hands in stone and mud in order to reconnect with his deepest self. He began building a stone tower in his backyard that had neither electricity, heat, nor running water, and it served as his spiritual retreat until the end of his days. Turns out that running away to hide in the desert was exactly the right thing to do, even though it may not have seemed like it at the time.

Once Elijah is deep in the purifying desert, he cries out to Yahweh: "It is enough. Now, Lord, take away my life." That cry is itself a kind of abandonment: "My life belongs to you, Yahweh, and you may have it back. I don't want it any more." And note what happens by way of response: one, an angelic messenger brought him nourishment, and two, the messenger directed him to go to Yahweh's mountain. Elijah's act of abandonment to the spiritual powers brought forth a response from the spiritual powers: that which nourishes was provided and directions were given. No explanations, only directions.

I can imagine Elijah rolling his eyes. Like any man, when there's something wrong, he wants to know exactly what it is so he can fix it and get on with things. Why waste time talking and traipsing around? Let's fix it and be done! It can be very hard for us men to get our heads around a destination with no sense of why we're going there.

But Elijah follows the leading of the Spirit and goes to Yahweh's holy mountain, Mt. Horeb. There, he crawls into a cave and sleeps. The next morning, Yahweh's voice

comes to him in the cave: “Elijah, what are you doing here?” Elijah replies in effect, “I’m here to turn in my papers. I’m alone in my pursuit and my calling and the queen wants to kill me.”

What happens next to Elijah was one of the rare instances in the Old Testament in which Yahweh manifested himself in response to one man’s need. It signifies a way of dealing with a spiritual crisis such as Elijah was experiencing and such as some of us have or will have experienced.

From I Kings 19, I quote: “And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake 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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when he heard it, Elijah wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out and stood in the entering in of the cave.”

A man may reach a point in his life at which he has seen the fire, heard the thunder, and felt the earthquake. He may have been the cause of these events in his outer life — indeed, his outer life may be such a success that listening to that still small voice within him seems frustrating and nonsensical. Yet that voice must be listened to, for it directs the man out of the despair of achievement and toward the goals of later life—spiritual completion and perspective — in short, towards becoming the trusted and invaluable elder who bears the tradition of wisdom for his people. Elijah is called upon to go back down from the mountain and into the world of human society again and to anoint a successor. The handwriting is on the wall for his days as an activist prophet; his job now is to be a spiritual mentor—and one of his tasks is surely teaching others

how to embrace the stillness so they too can listen for the still small voice of the wholeness of God.

In the second stanza of his "Sailing to Byzantium," William Butler Yeats gets it right. Listen:

"An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress..."

So, my older brothers, I call you to grieve your losses. Weep for the person you once were but are no longer. Weep for your lost and missed opportunities, for the roads taken and the roads not taken. And sing louder for every tatter in your mortal dress. I call for you to purify yourselves, and to hear the wind, feel the earthquake, and see the fire. But most of all, I call for you to listen for that still small voice, for it is itself the path you must take.

And I wish for you the threefold blessing of Aaron:

The Lord bless you and keep you,

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Amen.