

Sunday, June 23, 2013: 1 Kings 19:1-4 (5-7), 8-15a; Isaiah 65:1-9

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [June 12, 2013](#) issue

A vengeful howl among political leaders in North Carolina has silenced God's voice as legislators try to resume executions of those on death row. "Justice requires that we restart the death penalty and carry out these executions," insists Senator Thom Goolsby (R., N.C.). "We have a moral obligation to ensure [that] death-row criminals . . . finally face justice." These executions symbolize a need for revenge, a belief in justice as retribution and morality as Nietzschean resentment. The call for human blood as atonement for crime has nothing to do with God's justice and everything to do with our intransigent cycles of violence.

Elijah and Jezebel found themselves caught up in this craving for retaliation. At Elijah's request, the God of Israel ignited his sacrifice with flames from heaven, thus affirming Elijah's divine authority and exposing the prophets of Baal as impotent. Then Elijah used his stature as the triumphant prophet to punish his enemies: "Seize the prophets of Baal," he commanded. When the people delivered the false prophets, Elijah killed them (1 Kings 18:40).

God didn't tell him to take up a sword and strike down his enemies. If God had wanted them dead, God could have incinerated them like the bull on the altar. Is this an instance of prophetic misconduct, of an errant prophet who abuses the power of the office in an act of vengeance? God's command to Elijah was plain: "Go, present yourself to Ahab; I will send rain on the earth" (18:1). His task was to declare God's end to the drought. That's all. But Elijah's zeal got the best of him, and he had to escape the consequences of his murders when Jezebel promised revenge. Alone in the wilderness, Elijah knew what would come next, so he prayed: "O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

An angel of the Lord disturbed Elijah's melancholy and sent him to Mount Horeb, but Elijah found only silence there. God showed up not in fearsome spectacles but in the sound of silence, of faint silence, of invisible silence. The stillness of God hushed Elijah's passion for sensational acts of authority. In the end, God deposed Elijah from his prophetic office: "You shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah," God told Elijah, "as prophet in your place" (19:16).

Ephrem the Syrian, a fourth-century hymnist and theologian, says that in the revelation on Mount Horeb, God attempts “to correct [Elijah’s] excessive zeal and to lead him to imitate, according to righteousness, the providence of the Most High who regulates the judgments of his justice through the abundant mercy of his grace.” God judges with abundant mercy. God’s justice is grace.

This story turns us away from the temptation to use violence in our pursuit of God’s justice. While God abhorred the prophets of Baal as much as Elijah did, God wasn’t rash like Elijah.

Instead, Isaiah says, God is patient and long-suffering, like a vinedresser who endures unfruitful seasons, awaiting the succulent grapes that will produce good wine. “As the wine is found in the cluster, and they say, ‘Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it,’ so I will do for my servants’ sake” (Isa. 65:8). God waits, and in God’s waiting we are invited to silence our zeal for revenge and retaliation and to learn to dwell in God’s forbearance while waiting for new life to grow in us.

As a protest against a zealous war, Weldon Nisly of Seattle Mennonite Church joined a Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation to Iraq. In 2003, during the U.S. shock and awe campaign, Nisly and others on the team were in Baghdad listening to stories of suffering, documenting civilians killed by the bombs and praying for an end to the violence. On their way back to Jordan their vehicle crashed. Nisly found help in Ar Rutba, where Iraqi doctors and nurses saved his life in a makeshift medical clinic near the rubble of the hospital that U.S. forces had bombed three days earlier.

Years later, Nisly returned to Ar Rutba to ask staff members why they had cared for him, a citizen of the country at war with Iraq. “We did not see you as Americans or as an enemy,” they responded. “We saw you as injured people who needed help.”

In a season of violence, people in an Iraqi desert saved the life of a citizen from a country whose military was exploding buildings in their cities and towns. Like the vinedresser in Isaiah’s prophecy, they chose against vengeance because they hoped new life would grow: “Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it”—the blessing of fragile peace in the midst of zealous wars, the blessing of friendship among so-called enemies. “Please tell your people,” Nisly’s nurse said to him, “we want to be friends with you. We want to live in peace with you.”