

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Man of the day:

The Prophet Elijah

When Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the top of the mountain, he was transfigured before their eyes, and his robe and his face were suddenly as bright as the sun. And they saw beside him the two great prophets of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah. Jesus was speaking with them, and Peter must have caught some of that conversation, because, though he didn't really know what he was saying, he did get the persons right. "Lord," he said, "it is good for us to be here!" And he said they should knock together three huts to spend the night in, one for the Lord, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.

You should know who Moses was. But who was Elijah?

Moses is credited with writing the Torah,

that is the first five books of the Old Testament, and Elijah is credited with writing – nothing at all. Moses brought the children of Israel out of their slavery in Egypt. He led those many thousands of people across the Red Sea and the desert, to the verge of the Promised Land.

Elijah didn't do that. Elijah was a prophet in Israel when almost everyone was worshipping Baal instead of God. The wicked king Ahab

and the worse queen Jezebel did so too. Elijah could hardly find more than a handful of men in Israel who did not want to kill him. Yet when we think of each of them, Moses and Elijah, there is something about their stories that should remind us of Holy Communion.

You may remember that there came a Pharaoh in Egypt

who forgot everything that the son of Israel, the wise Joseph, had done for the Egyptians. He saw that the Israelites were having many



children, and he tried to put a stop to it by ordering the murder of baby boys. But Moses' mother found a way to save him. She put the little baby in a basket and floated it down the shallows of the Nile River, where it would be discovered by Pharaoh's sister, and taken care of.

But it wasn't just a "basket," in the Hebrew language. It was an ark. It's the same word they used to describe Noah's Ark and another important Ark, the Ark of the Covenant. Now, when Moses had grown up, and had led the Israelites out of Egypt, they got hungry in the desert, and they complained, saying that they would have been better off as slaves, so long as they had meat in the pot. So Moses prayed for them, even though they were ungrateful, and God sent them the bread from heaven – the manna and the quail. That was the gentlest of God's gifts to them. The more thunderous one was the Law itself, etched on stone tablets. The Israelites took those tablets and some of the manna, along with Aaron's priestly staff, and they preserved them in the Ark of the Covenant, that boat or basket of God's promise never to abandon them, if they would keep His law.

But they didn't keep it, and that brings us to Elijah. In his time, the kingdom once ruled by David and Solomon had been split in two, Israel in the north, almost pagan, and Judah in the south, forgetful of the Law but not quite so bad as their northern cousins. Elijah lived in the north. It was Elijah's job to try to bring Israel back to worship of the one God, and that was not easy to do. At one point, after an apparently great success – slaughtering four hundred and fifty priests of the false god Baal –

Elijah lay down to die, saying that he was worthless, like his fathers. But the Lord wouldn't let him be. He had once sent ravens to Elijah to feed him bread. This time ravens are not enough. He sends an angel to command Elijah, "Arise, and eat." There beside him is a loaf of bread, and in the strength of that, Elijah walks for forty days and nights, to Horeb the mountain of God.

If Moses is the prophet of the glorious and fearful visions of God's power – the pillar of fire, the parting of the waves of the Red Sea – then Elijah is the prophet of a God who is hidden. Let us think about this for a moment. God is the almighty, the creator of the whole universe, and He is also in the smallest of all things; nothing is too small for his notice. In that way Elijah is just as great a

forerunner of the Lord of the Eucharist as Moses with the manna was. For when God showed himself to Elijah, it was not in the fire or the whirlwind or the earthquake, but in a "still small voice," from which the prophet hid his face in awe.

That reminds me of a great and quiet miracle Elijah performed. There was again terrible famine in the land. No manna was to come for those people. But Elijah met a poor widow one day gathering sticks. When he asked her what she was doing, she said that she had just a little bit of flour left, and a little oil. She was going to take the sticks inside her house, light a fire, bake a cake from what she had, share it with her son, and then die.

But Elijah told her instead to bake *him* a cake first, and he promised that her flour would never run out and her jar of oil would never run dry. He was calling her to perform an act of great faith, hope, and charity, and she did it, and sure

“For when God showed himself to Elijah, it was not in the fire or the whirlwind or the earthquake, but in a “still small voice,” from which the prophet hid his face in awe.”

enough, while everyone around was dying of hunger, there was from that day on always meal and oil for her household. And when Elijah returned to her house some time later, when her beloved son had just died, the prophet stretched himself out over the lad's lifeless body three times and cried out to God in prayer. The soul entered the body again, and Elijah returned the boy to his mother.

There you have the Eucharist, in a shadowy form, and the Resurrection too.

There's more. When Elijah was about to be taken up from the earth in chariots of fire, his disciple Elisha – say his name e-LISH-a – begged for a “double portion” of power from him, the portion that a first-born son would receive from his father. So it was done. Elisha worked wonders in Israel that his master Elijah did not, not by his own power, which was nothing, but by God's grace. So too the woman with the hemorrhage touched the cloak of Jesus to be healed, but after the resurrection, and the Lord's ascension into heaven, and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, all it took for one lame man to be healed was that the *shadow* of Peter's cloak had touched him.

The God who is so bright that it darkens our eyes gives grace to us in hidden ways, and sometimes the gentler and quieter the gift, the richer it is. Think of it when you receive that quiet gift of Holy Communion.



Magdalen College Collegiate Summer Program

Session 1: July 11-25, 2020

Session 2: August 1-15, 2020



- Live in the college's residences
- Study philosophy, theology, politics, and literature
- Experience the fine arts
- Attend daily Mass
- Enjoy sports, drama, and social events

Register today!
www.magdalen.edu



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts is a joyfully Catholic, great books college located on a mountain in beautiful New Hampshire. The college offers a transformative liberal education of the whole person, ordered to human flourishing and communion, animated by the perennial questions, given shape by the classic books, and nourished by a vibrant liturgical and sacramental culture. Magdalen College calls all within her community to enter the great conversation of authors seeking wisdom that has unfolded across the ages, cultivating a life of virtue, poetic imagination, service, and life-giving fidelity.