April 16, 2023

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THE WAY SALT WORKS

1 Kings 19

Back in 2016 the British government, concerned about drugs being smuggled into the country through airports, launched a program to train and employ dogs to sniff out the drugs. They spent nearly $2 million on the program. Once the dogs were fully trained they put them to work at Manchester Airport in England. After 6 months on the job the dogs had discovered exactly none of the drugs they were trained to find. A report on the program did say one dog did “Persistently turned up a lot of cheeses and sausages.” You know, Toby and Anna have 3 dogs that can do that very effectively without any training at all. It sure wouldn’t cost $2 million to have them do it. Maybe I should suggest Toby and Anna make that offer to the British.

I have no doubt that has been a big disappointment to those who came up with what sounded like a reasonable idea. All of us are going to experience times like that, times when life just doesn’t match up with our hopes and dreams. Laurie was very disappointed when she prepared for the music Easter Sunday and was excited about it, then lost her voice the day before Easter. She assumed at worst her voice would come back in 3 or 4 days. It’s still not back. This has been heard for her. Laurie is exceedingly relational. Connecting with people is like breathing to her. It is that necessary. She readily admits she made many trips to the principal’s office in her school days because she was constantly talking in class. She is the only person I know who got kicked out of a class in college because she kept talking. Not talking has been frustrating and hard for her. She was taking care of our grandsons, Wesley and Hunter and Wesley couldn’t understand why she wasn’t talking. She told him she had lost her voice. He said, “Where did it go?” That’s what Laurie wanted to know. It is easy to become discouraged in such times. Today I want us to look at the example of a great hero of the faith who went through a terribly discouraging experience. Hopefully we will learn what will and won’t help us when we go through such times. Let’s look at 1 Kings 19.

ELIJAH WENT INTO A CAVE

The backstory on this incident is important. It starts in 1 Kings 16:23. That verse says that Omri, the commander of the army of Israel under King Zimri, became the king of Israel. I know, the names sound like something out of *Lord Of The Rings;* Gimli should have been the next king. I think that’s because Tolkien might have gotten inspiration for names in his books from names like these. Anyway, Zimri had not been a good king. Verse 19 said he did evil in the sight of the Lord, Verse 25 tells us that Omari was worse. But 16:30-32 tells us his son, Ahab, would surpass him. “Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria.” Ahab led Israel to adopt the worship of the false god, Baal.

In 1 Kings 18 the prophet Elijah confronted Ahab and called him the “troubler of Israel” because he had abandoned the Lord’s commands and followed Baal. Confronting the king in that day could have resulted in him being summarily executed. But Ahab was a little afraid of Elijah and he let him get away with it. So Elijah told him to summon the people from all over Israel to Mount Carmel to meet him, and to be sure to bring the 850 government supported prophets of Baal and Asherah. Verse 21 says, “Elijah went before the people and said, ‘How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” He proposed a contest. He and the priests of the false gods would each put a sacrificial bull on a pile of wood, then ask their gods to miraculously consume the sacrifice by fire. Whichever God answered would prove himself to be the true God whom the people should worship. The people answered, “What you say is good.” In other words, hey, yeah this is a great idea. A divine showdown, the gunfight at the Mount Carmel corral. Winner take all. Elijah expected God to win and thought this would bring Israel around to finally returning to the true God.

Elijah had home field advantage, so he gave the equivalent of calling the coin toss to the visiting team, the prophets of Baal. They could choose which bull they chose. He let them go first. That was a big advantage because this contest had sudden death overtime rules, so the first God to score would win, meaning, Elijah was giving the other team the chance to win the game before the God of Israel even got to touch the ball. They cried out to their idol all day, but nothing happened.

Early in the evening the pitch clock ran out on them. They’d had long enough. It was Elijah’s turn. He built an altar, put wood and the sacrifice on it, then had them soak the sacrifice with water three times. This was to prove to them what was about to happen was not some magician’s clever trick. Then he prayed that God would send fire down to consume the whole thing. Verse 38 says, “Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and even the soil.” When the people saw it they shouted, “The Lord, he is God, the Lord he is God!” The God of Israel won in a rout. They killed all the prophets of the false gods. This was the turning point when Israel finally turned back to worshiping their true God. At least that’s what Elijah thought. It was a no doubt win for God. Baal was a total no show because he was a fake, and everyone knew it.

But chapter 19 begins with Ahab telling his horrible wife, Jezebel, what Ahab had done. She didn’t do the reasonable thing, which would have been to say, “Hmm, maybe I need to reexamine my choice of gods. That was convincing proof.” Instead she sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them,” referring to the now dead priests of Baal. In other words, if I don’t make you dead by tomorrow, then I should die . She said somebody needs to die in the next 24 hours, either you and me. I’m choosing you. It occurred to me that was likely an empty threat. Why send a messenger to tell him that? All that would do is put him on his guard. The more reasonable strategy would have been not to send a messenger, but a hit team to carry out the threat. Or if she needed time to put a plan into place, to say nothing to Elijah, keeping the element of surprise in play. I suspect she knew she wasn’t going to carry out the threat because after his victory, if she killed him, it might be the last thing she did. I also think she was afraid of him. So she threatened him in hopes of scaring him into doing exactly what he did, run away. She got rid of him, but with no blood on her hands. Which was just what she hoped for.

Elijah, afraid for his life, ran south about 65 miles to Beersheba. He left his servant in that town then went on another 10 or 15 miles into the wilderness by himself. Fear can be a very discouraging emotion, and it certainly was for Elijah. But disappointment was also a huge factor because he realized there wouldn’t be the kind of change he hoped for. In fact, it was worse than ever. Now his life was at risk too. He was deeply discouraged.

I thought about this passage because I was thinking about how lows tend to follow highs generally. That’s part of life. I was thinking about this because we had Easter Sunday last week. Easter is such an up day. Ours didn’t go as smoothly as I hoped it would go, but it is still a joyful, hopeful, up day. It is all about the resurrection. It is a day people want to go to church and rejoice. But what follows after a high like that? Often it is a low feeling, a down time.

Sometimes we find ourselves discouraged for much more powerful reasons. We are going through hard times. Things look bleak. We don’t feel well. Things we hope for are just not happening. Elijah experienced that in the extreme. There are some important things we can learn from his experience in this chapter about how not to handle discouragement, and how to handle it.

First, let’s note some things he did that are not helpful.

*He wanted to quit.*

This reminds me of one my favorite old stories. It was about a young woman living in an apartment in this area. Things weren’t going as she had hoped and she was discouraged. She sat out on her second floor balcony, hoping the bright sunny day might cheer her up. Sitting there she noticed a man sitting on the grass down below her apartment. He was obviously down on his luck, maybe even homeless. He looked tattered, and as he sat with his head in his hands, looking forlorn, she realized he apparently had it much worse than she did. Her heart went out to him, and she wanted to do something to cheer him up. She got a $20 bill, wrote a note that said, “Don’t despair,” wrapped it up with a small rock she had, and tossed it down onto the grass by him. He noticed it, opened it up, looked at it, then he brightened, looked up at her, and nodded with a big grin on his face. He waved cheerily at her then walked away moving quickly. She felt good that she had lifted his spirits. Just the act of helping another person made her feel better. Late the next day there was a knock at her door. She opened it and was surprised to see that same man standing there. Then he handed her a $100 bill and said, “Here you are.” She was dumbfounded. She said, “What’s this for?” He said, “Don’t despair.” Now she was more confused. She said, “What do you mean?” He said, “Don’t Despair.” She said, “I don’t understand.” The man said, “You know, Don’t Despair. He won the third race at Del Mar at 5 to 1. Those are your winnings.”

Apparently Elijah needed someone to encourage him with a note telling him to not despair. He was so despairing that he just wanted it all to be over. He couldn’t take anymore. He wasn’t just feeling a little down, dipping his toe in discouragement. He was taking a hot soaking bath in it. I don’t know why, but it seems like when we get down it almost feels good to wallow in it. One of the problems with discouragement is it can cause us to despair to the point we just want to give up. What’s the use?

*He got down on himself*.

At the end of verse 4 he said, “I am no better than my ancestors.” His ancestors had been terrible, consistently doing evil. For several generations they had consistently “done evil in the eyes of the Lord.” They had failed to worship God.

Elijah is saying to himself, “I’m no better than they were. I’m a failure, a loser. I haven’t done any good at all.” Was that true? Not even close to true. Elijah had been heroic. He had done astounding things in the power of God. He had shown great courage. Taking on Ahab and Jezebel was showing bravery in the face of great danger. And he stayed faithful to God the whole time. He was nothing like his ancestors. But when life is discouraging it tends to color everything in dark colors. Everything looks negative. When we look at ourselves all we can see is our shortcomings and failures. So we beat ourselves up.

The problem with those times of discouragement is we completely lose objectivity. There is no way anyone could see him as being like his ancestors. But that was how he felt. Somehow it feels masochistically good to beat ourselves up when we feel bad. There was an interesting study some psychologists did a few years back. They divided their subjects into two groups. The first group they told to think of some pleasant thing that happened in their lives, then to write down their thoughts. The second group they told to think of something they felt bad about, some experience they had where they felt they had not done the right thing, and then to write down their thoughts. After they were done writing they had them stick their hand in a bucket of ice water and leave it there as long as they could. The result showed that the people who had focused on something they felt bad about left their hands in the ice water significantly longer than the other group. This was because somehow they felt they needed to punish themselves for what they had done.

Elijah, rather irrationally, was beating himself up because things hadn’t gone the way he hoped, and he figured it must have been his fault somehow.

*He didn’t take note of the miracle*.

The prophet then went to sleep under a bush. Obviously he must have been exhausted, because that could not have been a very comfortable place to sleep. At one point an amazing thing happened. An angel woke him up and said, “Get up and eat.” He looked around and saw a loaf of bread and some fresh water. It says he ate and drank and then went back to sleep. Do you notice anything missing in that scene? He’s all alone in the middle of the wilderness, when suddenly somebody wakes him up, and there’s food and water there. Where did that come from? Wouldn’t you expect some sort of reaction to that other than going back to sleep?

Shouldn’t there have been some comment like, “Whoa, where did this come from? And who are you?” Shouldn’t he have been amazed because God has provided for him in an astounding way? He’s just experienced a miracle of God providing for him, and he kind of takes it for granted and goes back to sleep. We can do something somewhat akin to that. In those times of discouragement when everything looks dark, we can easily forget about the good things God has put in our lives. We fail to remember that every day is a gift from him. We don’t think about how there are people who love us and care about us. We forget how God has worked in our lives in the past. This is a bad approach. We should always remember the good God showers on us and give thanks for those good things.

*He went into a dark place* (in this case, a cave).

Elijah went further into the wilderness of Sinai, to Mt. Horeb. He found a cave and sheltered there for the night. On the face of it there was nothing wrong with that. But I find it interesting that he found a dark place to hunker down all by himself. He ends up in an isolated, dark place, all alone.

I have noticed a curious thing that happens with some believers. When the really hard stuff hits and they get discouraged, they cut themselves off. They stay away and isolate themselves. That actually makes the problem worse. God has given us the body of Christ to support us and encourage us. When we cut ourselves off like that it actually just encourages wallowing in our problem. We need the encouragement and love of others during such times.

*He felt sorry for himself because life wasn’t fair*.

In verse 18 God says to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” This is not God just asking Elijah what’s up? Hey, Eli, what’re you up to? God knows where he is and he knows why he’s there. The question is itself a rebuke. What are you doing here in a place you shouldn’t be? Elijah replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” Hey God, I’ve been working hard to serve you. And this is what I get. They’ve killed everyone else who serves you, I’m all on my own, the only left, and now they’re coming after me. Well call the Waamublance, Elijah. His favorite song at that point was an oldie that went, “It’s my party and I’ll cry if I want to, you would cry to if it happened to you.”

Elijah was deep into “poor me.” He’d done everything God had told him to do. He’d been bold and courageous and faithful, and his reward was failure and death threats. He deserved better in his mind. This is a pity party to end all pity parties. And it is something we all tend to be pretty good at. Poor me.

Did you notice how irrational Elijah was? He was completely contradicting himself. First he said, “I am no better than my ancestors.” I’m a loser, I’m a failure, I’m worthless. But now he’s saying, “I have been very zealous for the Lord.” That’s the exact opposite of what he’d said earlier. Which is it, Elijah? Discouragement can cause us to not think very rationally.

GOD ANSWERED ELIJAH

Fortunately, God loves his people, is patient with them, and works to save them from themselves. He does that in this chapter with Elijah, and we can see in his actions the things we need that help us deal with discouragement.

*Count on the presence of God.*

When God spoke to Elijah he began with “Why are you here?” There is a significant point in the wording of that question that we should not miss. God said, “Why are you *here*,” not “Why are you *there*?” What does that tell you? God was there too. It says that God was with him in that cave. When we get discouraged, one of the most important things we can do is know that God has not abandoned us. He is with us. God did not condemn him or give up on him. He was there with him, still loving him and encouraging him.

When we feel like we have failed or are just one big hot mess, we need to remember that God is present with us, patiently loving and encouraging us. Jesus knew it was crucial for us to know that. On the night before he was arrested he warned his followers that hard, deeply discouraging times were ahead. In John 16:2 Jesus said, “They will put you out of the synagogue.” That meant they would be ostracized from their own community. He went on to say, “In fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.” There’s a cheery future. All this in the context of a discussion of the fact that Jesus was going away. But then he said in verse 7, “Very truly I tell you that it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” The Advocate is his Spirit, the Holy Spirit who would be with us, and even in us. Having his Spirit, his presence with us was the thing that will enable us to deal with even the difficult things he had just described.

Laurie and I had an important moment when we were on our honeymoon so many years ago. As you know the events leading up to a wedding are exciting and stressful. One might even say all consuming. That was particularly true in a big wedding such as we had, attended by 400 people. So life was a whirlwind. The icing on the cake was the morning after the wedding we got on an airplane and flew to Hawaii, a place we had never been but were excited about seeing, for our honeymoon. Our first few days were glorious. Several days into our honeymoon I woke up and felt this strange since of a sort of emptiness. It’s hard to describe what I was feeling. I really couldn’t put it into words then, and I still can’t. I didn’t know exactly what it was, but something felt off. It certainly wasn’t disappointment with Laurie, because being married to her was just pure joy. I didn’t want to say anything to her because I didn’t want to give her any hint of a thought that I wasn’t happy being married to her, because that was absolutely not true. I didn’t say anything. But that morning as we ate breakfast, Laurie sort of tentatively expressed something similar. She affirmed that it wasn’t about me. I told her I knew what she meant. So we decided that before we did any activities that day we would begin by spending some time with God, reading his Bible, talking and listening to him. So we each individually read a Psalm, thought about it, wrote down some thoughts. Then we shared what we had seen and we prayed together. Immediately that since of emptiness disappeared. What had been missing was us living in the presence of God. We’d been living on excitement and adrenaline, and when that wore off that inevitable low point hit. What lifted our spirits out of that, almost instantly was once again enjoying the presence of God.

*Recognize that God is in the whisper.*

In verse 11 the Lord said to Elijah, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Elijah, I know you think all is lost, everything is hopeless, there’s no point in going on. But You’re wrong. What God showed him was impressive. First came hurricane force winds. Verse 12 says it tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord. That’s figurative. It is intended to help us feel the violence of this wind as it pounded the mountain, rocks were rolling down the mountain, stuff was flying through the air and the wind howled. Elijah was yelling, “Yes, God, that’s what I’m talking about. Now this is more like it. You’re going to show them!” This was exactly what Elijah thought was needed. But then we are told, “But the Lord was not in the wind.”

Next came an earthquake. Well, no one needs to tell us about the power of an earthquake. It is deeply disturbing when the earth itself is moving. How powerful does a force have to be to move the very ground? It is scary. This is the kind of power Elijah was hoping to see. But the Lord wasn’t in the quake. Next came a fire. Once again, no one needs to tell us about the terrible nature of a brush fire in a dry tinderbox landscape. It is terrifying. But once again, the Lord wasn’t in the fire. Studying this passage I recalled on old rock band called Earth, Wind and Fire. I wondered if they got their name from this passage. Turns out it didn’t. It came from one of the member’s fascination with astrology. But all of these were truly impressive forces of nature. They seemed like God releasing a little bit of his power. But none of these were what God was going.

Next came a gentle whisper, and that was the voice of God. God was speaking quietly to Elijah. God didn’t have laryngitis. He was teaching Elijah. He repeated his question, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”. Elijah expected God to do the powerful, the impressive, and that would change everything. God showed Elijah that he wasn’t in the big and powerful. He is in the quiet, the gentle whisper.

In other words, God was still working in a quiet, almost invisible way. There is a lesson here that is hard for us to learn and accept. We love the big, the dramatic, the powerful. God generally works in quiet ways in our lives and in our world as well. Yes, the big, the powerful is impressive to the world, but it is mostly not what God is doing. That’s because it is not what changes hearts. What changes hearts is love, coming in quiet, humble and often gentle ways. That’s how God mostly works in us.

This reminded me of the treatments I’ve been receiving. I’ve been given drugs that rev up my immune system and enable my T cells to overcome the defenses of cancer cells. The strange thing is I can’t feel that. I can’t see it. Nothing dramatic is occurring. There is no obvious sign of it. But quietly in a way I can’t see, my immune system is going about it’s work. God works much like that.

God was telling Elijah that he was still working in and with him. God’s gentle quiet whisper was one man being faithful to serve God. We may not see spectacular things. That’s all right. Remember that Jesus said in Matthew 7:14, “Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” Those who follow the Lord and serve him are always going to be in the minority. We are always going to be the few, not the many, We are not going to be the big, the spectacular. We are going to be the gentle whisper.

In Matthew 5:13 Jesus said to his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth.” Think about how salt works. I like salty things. I like more salt on my tortilla chips than the average Jose. Popcorn also. Same with French Fries, unless, of course, I have copious amounts of ketchup. But even I find if there’s too much salt it is inedible. If salt is the main thing you taste, it’s not going to be good. Jesus was telling us those who follow the Lord are not going to be the main flavor of the world, ever. So we are going to need to think in terms of being that gentle whisper, each of us being faithful to God.

I think sometimes we don’t realize how much impact one faithful person can have. Ukraine has been much in the news lately. The current war is the latest and most violent episode in a long struggle for Ukraine to be independent of Russia. There is an interesting story from 2004 that not many here know about. Victor Yushchenko was a candidate for president. He warned against Russian influence and wanted to move the country toward the West, especially NATO. He ran against a candidate from the entrenched party that had ties to Russia. It almost cost him his life, due to an assassination attempt. He survived, and on election day the polls showed he had a comfortable lead. That evening the state run television announced that Yushchenko had been decisively defeated. However, the authorities failed to take into account a feature of Ukrainian television. It provided translation for the hearing impaired. On a small screen insert in the lower right corner a woman signed the translation. Only she didn’t translate. She signed, “I am addressing all the deaf citizens of Ukraine. Don’t believe what they say. They are lying, and I am ashamed to translate these lies. Yushchenko is our president.” No one in the studio knew what she was saying. Deaf people began text messaging their friends about the fraudulent election results. Word began to spread. Soon journalists got wind of the story and began to deny the party line. In the next few weeks a million people flooded the capital city wearing orange, and this led to what has been called the Orange Revolution. The government finally had to consent to new elections in which Yushchenko was the undisputed winner. It was all started by one woman bravely doing what is right.

*Know that God still has a plan so there is hope.*

God told Elijah that there was a plan. Elijah was to go back to Israel. God had some assignments for him. He was to anoint new kinds over Aram and Israel, and he was to appoint Elisha as the prophet who would succeed him. Elijah would be retiring soon, and there was a replacement for him, which meant he was not the only one left. God emphasized that last point when he told Elijah in verse 18, “I reserve 7,000 in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal.” You are far from alone, Elijah. There are literally thousands of people still faithful to God.

One of the most important things we need when we are discouraged is hope. Elijah had lost hope. He thought the cause was lost. But God told him he still had a plan, it was moving forward and it was far from lost. God was still in control. Elijah had an idea, a plan for how things were going to go. At first that seemed to be exactly what happened. And then it all came crashing down. The plan failed, all hope was lost. The problem was the Elijah made everything about him and his plan. He lost sight of the fact that God may have a much greater plan that he knew nothing about.

*Focus on God’s plan, not ours.*

God’s plan wasn’t Elijah’s. It wasn’t going to go the way the prophet wanted. He was far from alone, but 7000 people faithful to God, while way more than 1, is still a small number. Population estimates for Israel in those days range from about 500,000 to near a million. Even taking 500,000 as the number, those faithful to Israel would amount to about 1.4% of the population. That’s a small percentage.

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But God had a plan. Call it the immunotherapy plan. God strengthening and using a few faithful people. His plan continued until Messiah finally came, and it is still continuing today. It wasn’t the plan that Elijah had. It might not be the plan that we would have. But what is important is that God’s plan is moving forward and will be completed.

The Pursuit of Wonder website has a video on it that depicts a man wondering whether everything happens for a reason. In the fictional piece the young man contends he has led a good and decent life, but then an earthquake destroys his home and he ends up in the hospital with serious, life-threatening injuries. He says, “If I’ve never done anything deserving of such a tragedy, how could there be any good reason for this occurring to me?” He concludes his prior belief that everything happens for a reason was wrong. “Every time I heard it and believed it, every time I seemingly found a reason for why something happened to me I meant it happened for a good reason, a just reason. I meant that there was some considerate order to the universe, and everything in my story was placed there to allow me to become the winner of it. But how foolish was I to think this?” He ends up concluding there is no reason for the things that happen there is no plan..

Notice the flaw in his thinking. It was that he thought everything happened so that he could become the winner in his story. He was focused on his plan for life, not God’s. Elijah was having a similar problem, and it is a problem most of us have. Discouragement comes when we hope for something, expect something, and it doesn’t happen, and we lose hope that it ever will. As long as we have hope we can deal with discouragement, but when we lose hope, then the discouragement gets overwhelming. When we live for our plan we invite discouragement, because at some point we discover that we can’t make our plans come to fruition. We do not control as much as we wish we could. The remedy for this is to set our heart on God’s plan, for God’s plan will be accomplished.

In Isaiah 46:10 God says, “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.’” God’s plan will happen. Job 42:1-2 says, “Then Job replied to the Lord, ‘I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted.’”

CONCLUSION

One day we were with Wesley, our grandson, and were getting ready to leave. At the same time Carissa, his mom, was getting the two boys to go on a walk with her. It was one of those ridiculously cold winter days we had a month or two ago, so Carissa wanted to put a jacket on Wesley. But Wesley didn’t want to wear a jacket. Carissa knew if he didn’t wear a jacket he would quickly get cold and insist on going home, so she made him put on a jacket. It was late in the day and he was tired, and when he gets tired, like all of us, he can get a little cranky. In this case, as Carissa began putting his jacket on him, he went into meltdown mode. He had something he wanted. He had a plan for his life and that plan did not include a jacket. When he didn’t get his way the tantrum began.

Elijah kind of had a tantrum. The problem was he wasn’t getting what he wanted so he melted down. That is the same problem we have. We have to choose whether we want our plan or God’s plan. When we are focused on our plans, we can be sure that a meltdown is coming, because at some point we will not get our way. The solution is for us to say to God, “Your will, not mine, Lord.” I live for your plan, whether I like it or not, because I know your plan is good. But I will remind you, do not be surprised if God’s plan is a quiet whisper rather than an earthquake, an anonymous, unnoticed baby being born in a stable rather than a fireworks show. Expect God’s plan to be lightly salted.