

WHEN YOU FEEL DEFEATED: ELIJAH'S STORY

I Kings 19

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A biblical prophet is a person who speaks for God, usually reminding people, warning people, to return to God's ways. Sometimes prophets are messengers of God's word, and sometimes their role is more active.

About 900 years before Jesus, Israel had a king named Ahab. Ahab had received the faith of his ancestors, the faith of Moses, but his wife, Jezebel, worshiped the pagan god known as Baal. That marriage set off a kind of holy war, a contest between the worshipers of the God of Israel and the worshipers of other gods. Here's how it's put in I Kings 16: "Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the God of Israel than all the kings of Israel before him."

Elijah emerges as the prophet of Yahweh, the God of Israel. Elijah is motivated by the words of the first commandment Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai - "I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other Gods before me."

A contest between competing gods may sound like ancient history that we can't relate to, but it's really a battle we live every day. Who do we worship? What do we worship? What is at the center of our lives? What's most important?

At my CrossTraining class on Wednesday night, we were discussing an article about the core beliefs and practices of Christianity. One sentence read like this: "The Christian love of God includes walking fully in the path of Jesus." I was prepared to skip right over that sentence because it sounded so uncontroversial. But one member of the class said, "Wait." That word "fully" - do any of us really walk fully in the path of Jesus?

It was an excellent observation. We may try, but we don't even always do that. There are many commitments that tug at us, many commitments that we juggle.

Understanding our core purpose, living by our values, having a clear sense of priorities helps us live our best lives, the lives we were meant to live.

Elijah believed that life is meant to be lived with God at its center. Whenever people begin worshiping other gods - whether pagan gods like Baal, or gods like money and power and success, life is thrown off balance.

God has given Israel a land and a way to live - the ten commandments are instructions for how the people of Israel should treat each other if they want to live in harmony with each other. Now King Ahab is throwing those rules out the window and encouraging people to worship other gods.

It infuriates Elijah and so he engages in several contests trying to prove to people that the God of Israel is the true God who is worthy of their worship.

He works tirelessly and there are two results. 1) He has become a wanted man; Jezebel threatens to have him killed and 2) Many people still are engaging in ritual sacrifices to the pagan gods.

Elijah had a few successes along the way but right now he feels defeated. Here's how I Kings 19 reads:

Elijah was terrified. He got up and ran for his life. He arrived at Beer-sheba in Judah and left his assistant there. ⁴ He himself went farther on into the desert a day's journey. He finally sat down under a solitary broom bush. He longed for his own death: "It's more than enough, Lord! Take my life because I'm no better than my ancestors." ⁵ He lay down and slept under the solitary broom bush.

Then suddenly a messenger tapped him and said to him, "Get up! Eat something!" Elijah opened his eyes and saw flatbread baked on glowing coals and a jar of water right by his head. He ate and drank, and then went back to sleep. The Lord's messenger returned a second time and tapped him. "Get up!" the messenger said. "Eat something, because you have a difficult road ahead of you." Elijah got up, ate and drank, and went refreshed by that food for forty days and nights until he arrived at Horeb, God's mountain. There he went into a cave and spent the night.

The Lord's word came to him and said, "Why are you here, Elijah?"

Elijah replied, "I've been very passionate for the Lord God of heavenly forces because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars, and they have murdered your prophets with the sword. I'm the only one left, and now they want to take my life too!"

The Lord said, "Go out and stand at the mountain before the Lord. The Lord is passing by." A very strong wind tore through the mountains and broke apart the stones before the Lord. But the Lord wasn't in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake. But the Lord wasn't in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was a fire. But the Lord wasn't in the fire. After the fire, there was a sound. Thin. Quiet."

The story of Elijah continues after that. He continues to speak out for God's justice, and he finds a successor for himself - Elisha, who will keep his work going in his own way.

Here's what I notice about this story. First, Elijah admits that he feels defeated. He's not embarrassed. He's doesn't deny it. He's completely honest and vulnerable before God. "It's more than enough, God!" He's at the end of his rope.

And if we're truthful with ourselves, most of us can relate to that feeling. "It's more than enough, God!" All of the things we have on our plate, all of the commitments we're trying to juggle. Or how it seems that just when you climb out of one hole, and think you're making progress in your life, you're hit with another obstacle. "It's more than enough, God!" Medical bills, loss of a job, living with a mental illness, a relative with dementia, a relationship that is strained to the point of breaking, worries about a child who's being bullied. We know what Elijah feels like.

This story has been swirling in my head for a few weeks ever since we started working on this worship series, so I've been noticing its relevance. Just last Sunday, I caught up with a parishioner who has faced some overwhelming challenges recently with his elderly parents...and you know how it is, these things are usually complicated, because our families are complicated systems. It's one thing to care for one's parents, but then you stir in the issue of how the siblings get along, and the history of those relationships and, well, it can feel like too much. So I asked him, "How are you doing with all this?" And he said to me, right out here in the entry way of the church, "Kelly, this experience has taught me who I am. It's made me realize how strong I am, and how strong my faith is and for that, I'm grateful."

First Elijah is honest, and open to receiving God's help, and then that help comes. First it comes in the form of rest, sleep, and then it comes in the form of food, and then, the narrative tells us that Elijah walked for forty days to Mount Horeb. We

don't need to even think about taking that literally; it's not meant to be so. 40 days is biblical shorthand, a way to say that Elijah was doing something holy and sacred. This journey was not so much about getting to a physical place on the map as it was about Elijah getting to a place where he could feel God's presence in a very real way again.

The next part of the story is probably the part that sounded familiar to you. Once Elijah gets to the mountain, he's told to stand on the mountain because God is passing by. Elijah's story is very much reminiscent of Moses' story in many ways, and this is one of them. Like Moses, Elijah will be given a glimpse of the most holy God. So Elijah stands on the mountain and first there is a mighty wind, but God isn't in the wind. Then there is an earthquake, but that's not how God chooses to be revealed either. Then a fire, but God isn't in the fire. And then, there is what some versions of the Bible call "a still, small voice." And that is how God chooses to be revealed to Elijah. I love that but I also love the way the Common English Bible translates it. God is revealed in a sound. Thin and quiet.

It is the sound of God's voice that will guide and strengthen Elijah for the rest of his life. He has remembered that God's presence has been with him all along.

Another parishioner conversed with me this week about some ups and downs in his life. He described one particular difficult time in his work life this way: "Sometimes you have to hit bottom before you can bounce up again." Those in twelve step programs know that experience well. "Rock bottom" is often the start of a journey towards health and wellness. Moments of disappointment are often our greatest teaching moments. They offer us the opportunity to learn that we are not alone, that there are people around us who are cheering us on. And they can open us up, in raw and vulnerable

and painful ways, to the truth that we are not self-sufficient, we're not supposed to be, we're not created to be. The quiet voice of God will guide us into the ways of wisdom.

Did you know that J.K. Rowling, before she found a publisher for the Harry Potter books, was rejected by 12 different publishers? A famous editor turned down George Orwell's Animal Farm as "unconvincing". Joseph Heller's Catch-22 was rejected as "not funny on any intellectual level", and John le Carré's first spy novel, The Spy Who Came in from the Cold, was passed from one publisher to another with the withering comment: "You're welcome to le Carré – he hasn't got any future." Herman Melville's Moby-Dick attracted the memorable response "First, we must ask, does it have to be a whale?"

Good writers learn from their rejection letters. One writer says this: "A rejection letter shredded my first-born novel. As I read the report, my world became very quiet and stopped rotating. What poisoned me was the fact that the report's criticisms were all absolutely true." Because he didn't run from defeat, because he was able to honest and open, the rejection sent him back to his desk to write a better book.

We will all face times of failure, loss and disappointment. The writer and great human being Maya Angelou put it in this beautiful perspective: "We will face defeats, but we will not be defeated." If we look at our times of disappointment as opportunities to learn to rely on God and deepen our faith, we will then be able to see how we grow in empathy.

I sat across the table at dinner Wednesday night with a woman in our church who has lost a child. She talked about her grief journey — how she couldn't talk about it at

all at first due to the raw pain, and she said, “I now believe that my main purpose in life is to help people talk about death, face it and not run from it.”

That is spiritual wisdom born of a mature embrace of life’s most difficult moments. I believe it is the wisdom of the prayer of St. Francis — that every one of life’s challenges can be transformed into an act of compassion. Because we have known sadness, we can be kinder to those who are sad. Because we have known despair, we can help bring hope into the world. Will you pray this with me?

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

And now, in closing, enjoy this video which features a child reading the Prayer of St. Francis and pictures of Francis’ home in the Tuscan village of Assisi in Italy.