

"Elijah's Pity Party"

1 Kings 19:1-18

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August 30, 2020

Can it be we are talking about the same individual this morning- ELIJAH THE PROPHET? After all, wasn't this the same man of faith who earlier survived a year of famine being fed by crows and drawing water from a small, polluted stream; a servant of God who ensured that a widow's barrel of flour and cruse of oil would never run dry and who subsequently restored to life her son after he died; a man of courage who brazenly took on the prophets of Baal—all 450 of them—and after thoroughly discrediting their phony god, had them all put to the sword? Can this be the same person who upon hearing that Jezebel has placed a bounty upon his head, is suddenly constricted with panic and now runs for fear of his life? What has HAPPENED to this mighty man of God who in chapter 18 is portrayed as invincible, as one who courageously stands up to king and prophets alike, but in CHAPTER 19 is shown to be weak and vulnerable, overwhelmed with fear and discouragement?

Our text informs us that following the slaughter of Jezebel's prophets, she becomes infuriated and vows that before the sun sets the following day, she will find Elijah and put an end to his miserable life. Alone and afraid, he flees to save himself. A day's journey into the wilderness, he collapses beneath a broom tree and asks God that he might die. But instead of taking his life, God sends an angel to restore him, not once but TWICE. Again he flees southward into the desert and he does not stop until he reaches Sinai--the Mount of God where Moses encountered the burning bush and received the Ten Commandments—where he holes up in the back of a cave thinking he is now safe, sure that NO ONE will ever find him THERE.

Well, for the moment, he may be safe from her but he's NOT safe from God who appears before him and asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He responds that in contrast to his OWN faithfulness, the people of Israel have forsaken God's covenant, thrown down his altars, and slain his prophets so that only HE is left alive. His confidence, once so indomitable, has now evaporated, and with it, all hope as well. Thus, this mighty eagle of the desert has suddenly been transformed into a timid mouse- fearful for his life, wallowing in self-pity, and doubting his own cause.

John the Baptist was often COMPARED to Elijah. Jesus said of him, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?...He was MORE than just a prophet...Truly I say to you that among those born of women there was no one ever GREATER than him." Yet, when John was thrown into Machaerus--Herod's dark prison--for his scathing criticisms of the king, it was not long before doubts began to creep into HIS heart and mind AS WELL. In order to satisfy them, he sent word to two of his disciples to go to Jesus and ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect some other?" But even on a deeper level, he had to have wondered to himself, "Could such a God be just who would allow his righteous servant to sit in prison so? How could such a powerful and holy God, who promises deliverance to the faithful, allow evil to flourish on the throne while one of his honest prophets suffers? How long will he let me remain in this stinking, rotting hole- forgotten, abandoned, and alone?"

And didn't Jesus, of all people, experience grave doubts and despair HIMSELF in his mission the night he was betrayed, alone in that garden. The Scriptures say he was overcome with fear and dismay, that his heart was ready to break within him. And didn't Christ call out hours later from that cross, "My God, my God, why has thou FORSAKEN me? Why art thou so far from HELPING me?" Is this NOT ELIJAH'S CRY from his exile in that wilderness and is this NOT JOHN'S CRY from his cold and dark PRISON CELL?

The despair of Elijah, the doubts of John, and even the anguish of Jesus himself- they all point to the genuine humanness of these men. And if such heroes of our faith were subjected to doubt and depression and the deepest kinds of fears in the performance of THEIR ministry, then how can we pretend that WE will never encounter such moods and testings OURSELVES. The reality is that no matter how strong our faith or how deep our commitment to Christ and his church, such moments of trial and testing are a part of EVERY person's life.

Speaking as one who's been a Presbyterian minister for over thirty-five years, the ministry can seem so attractive to so many. However, once you find yourself engaged in it full-time, it can often seem like Elijah's wilderness or the prison John the Baptist was thrown into. No matter where you go, no matter what you do, you can never forget that you are a representative of Christ though there are times you wish you could shed that collar and undertake some OTHER profession. You preach and teach impossible ethics- standards SO high you find yourself struggling with the guilt of knowing YOU can't even keep them. You are called upon to love people, some of whom you don't even like and would prefer to avoid if you could at times. You lose a great deal of your private life. For instance, in my first pastorate, I'd walk to the grocery store in the morning and by noon, everyone in the community would know what I was having for dinner that evening. You remain on call any hour of the day or night to possibly mediate some tragedy or crisis. But then, even in attempting to help persons through their most trying situations, you STILL feel so darn inadequate and unprepared for the task. I stand at the bedside of a dying patient and I remind her of Christ's promise that he will never leave or forsake her, assuring her that Jesus indeed DOES understand. But my words and assurances often seem SO FEEBLE in the face of such TERRIFYING REALITIES as cancer or heart disease, of Alzheimer's and now Covid-19.

Some years ago, I received a phone call from a close friend from seminary who had just finished preaching a funeral service for a child in his congregation. The deceased was a 12 year-old boy who had been accidentally killed by his 14 year-old brother when they were handling a loaded gun the father had kept around the house. He told me how the night before, as he sat alone in his study trying to compose his eulogy, he had to seriously ask himself, "Do I REALLY want to spend the rest of my life being so close to sickness and tragedy and death? Do I REALLY want to be this involved day-in and day-out with people's deepest needs and fears?" That question is one many ministers have had to ask THEMSELVES. Yes, there are many occasions when as pastors we feel like Elijah trapped in the rear of that cave.

But then when we read of his fears in the wilderness or consider John's doubts in prison or even our Lord's OWN despair within the confines of Gethsemane, we are then reminded that such is part of the journey, not just for ministers but for EVERY follower of Jesus Christ and that when we DO find ourselves feeling this way, WE'RE NOT ALONE. You may call it "fear" or

"despair" or "depression" but regardless of WHAT name you give it, it is a condition that ALL of us have or CONTINUE to experience in our lives. It can often be a reaction to a very stressful situation such as the death of a loved one, a divorce, chronic pain, the loss of a job or the break-up of a relationship and, as a result, we had to battle feelings of anguish and anxiety- they're real and they're legitimate.

But such depression and despair is not just a physical and emotional problem, it is a SPIRITUAL problem as well, a time during which all our spiritual resources seemed dried up and gone. Rather than experiencing the peace of Christ or joy in the Holy Spirit, we feel barren and empty; rather than feeling forgiven and a new creation as the scriptures promise us, we suffer from constant guilt and lead lives that evidence very little change. Therefore, we find ourselves asking, "Does God REALLY love me? Why has God ABANDONED me? WHAT terrible thing have I done? Am I LOSING my faith? WHERE can I turn to?" Or perhaps "Is there even a God out there who understands and CARES?" Spiritual depression is usually the deepest form of despair and it can sweep over us just as suddenly and fiercely as it did to Elijah.

FORTUNATELY, Elijah's doubts and fears have NOT disqualified him from serving as one of God's prophets, any more than Peter's denials of Christ eliminated HIM as a disciple and future head of the Church. If ANYTHING, his spiritual darkness and depth of loneliness was what made God even MORE necessary. It revealed to him his own helplessness and vulnerability and by doing so, it helped him to understand his own HUMANNESSE. When we see Elijah boldly confronting King Ahab or destroying the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, we might conclude here was a man far above the ordinary needs of you and me, that he was someone who didn't require love or sympathy or companionship as WE do. Yet, the truth is that such a person has NEVER existed, that far from a SUPERMAN, Elijah was a FRAIL and NEEDY CREATURE just like OURSELVES. We mustn't overlook the fact that God's special work of grace did not occur on the summit of Mount Carmel, at the moment of his GREATEST TRIUMPH, but in the EMPTINESS and DESOLATION OF THAT WILDERNESS where Elijah was alone and afraid. It was when he was depressed and a deserter that he discovered a sense of his own inadequacy, and it was only THEN that he could be delivered from all his pride and self-sufficiency and be driven into the arms of GOD and his ALL-SUFFICIENCY.

Through the events in his OWN life, St. Paul understood this all too well and he told the Christians at Corinth so. In the first chapter of his Second Epistle to them, he wrote:

"For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead; he delivered us from so deadly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again." (2 Cor. 1:8-10)

Here the great Apostle himself was honest enough to share how life became SO difficult for him, his trials seemingly far above what he felt he was able to manage, that he wanted to DIE so that, LIKE ELIJAH, he insisted that God take his life. Yet, by God's grace, he was safely brought through it all and as a result learned to base his trust no longer on HIMSELF and his OWN POWERS but on GOD ALONE. From then on, he was CONFIDENT that regardless of how bad things ever got for him in the future, he knew that God--in his faithfulness--would be there again

and again and **STILL** again for him to deliver him from his ordeal and afflictions- no matter **HOW GREAT** they might be!

But what about the cure? In 1 Kings 19, two things bring Elijah out of his state of discouragement and despair- **ONE** is to remind him that God's cause does not depend on the prophet's **PERSONAL SUCCESS OR NOT**. Elijah believes that all of God's prophets are dead and that he **ALONE** is left, that is, until God informs him that there are seven thousand of his prophets **YET** alive who have **NOT** bowed their knees to Baal just over the hill. When we feel alone, afraid, and full of pity, it's not all that difficult to convince ourselves that **NO ONE** suffers as intensely as **WE** do, or that the degree of suffering is **SO DEEP** that **NO ONE ELSE** can possibly understand. This is, of course, a fiction, a lie we tell ourselves when in fact there are persons **ALL AROUND US** whose troubles **FAR TRANSCEND OUR OWN** and whose understanding of suffering is **FAR GREATER** than **WE** may ever know.

And the **SECOND** is a **NEW** commission from God. He is to retrace his steps, leave Horeb, and travel to Damascus in order to anoint Hazael as King of Syria; then he is to anoint Jehu as King of Israel and Elisha as his own prophetic successor. As one commentator has put it, "Doubts will cease and misgivings vanish when God puts him to work." Elijah's return to the world signifies a return to God's service; his ministry is to continue as before. As I indicated in a sermon a couple of weeks back, when cast down and discouraged, one of the **BEST** cures is to try to do **SOMETHING WORTHWHILE** for **SOMEONE ELSE**. Just as there are individuals all around us whose problems and degrees of suffering far transcend our own, these same persons then become God-given opportunities for us to **SERVE** whether in our churches, our hospitals, or through our local service organizations to name just a few. We all have friends and neighbors who may be homebound or incapable of doing things as they once did. Well here's an opportunity for you **TO LOSE YOURSELVES BY HELPING OTHERS**. To **FORGET ONESELF**--if only for a bit--**AND TO REMEMBER** that there are **SO MANY OTHERS AROUND YOU WHO NEED YOUR ASSISTANCE** is the **MOST EFFECTIVE MEANS** for pulling you out of yourself, out of your self-constructed cocoons of self-pity and self-absorption and back into the world of hurts and needs where God has called you to live and serve in the **FIRST** place.

Our text tells us that during a dream, God sent an angel to minister to Elijah, to strengthen him in the midst of his panic- not once but **TWICE**. Then God encounters him later in the cave, in the one place the prophet hopes he will **NEVER** be found. This was to **REMINDE** him that God was **FULLY AWARE** of his fears, his doubts, and his depression, that he would **NOT** abandon his messenger but instead would **MINISTER TO HIM IN HIS WEAKNESS**. May this serve as the basis for our **OWN HOPE THIS MORNING**- the absolute conviction that **GOD UNDERSTANDS** those difficult times of testing when our faith seems depleted, when our fears become heightened, when our hopes all seemed dashed. Our God wishes to remind us that such moments shall **INDEED** pass, that where **DOUBTS** are often rooted in the vagaries of the mind and where **FEELINGS** come and go, are here today and gone tomorrow, **FAITH** on the other hand is **CONSTANT** and far **DEEPER** than our doubts! **FAITH** is the trust that **GREATER** than our thoughts, **GREATER** than our feelings, **GREATER** than our condition or our situation, there is **GOD** and that things **WILL** be OK because **HE LOVES US** and will **NEVER** give up on us, **EVER**! As one of my seminary professors like to put it, "I could never

NOT be a Christian. God is so deeply rooted in my life that I've got him IN MY CELLS, even in my DNA." Well, God is in OUR cells, OUR DNA AS WELL. When we DO find ourselves filled with doubts or fears, with dread or despair, remember how our Heavenly Father is there for US. Remember that God KNOWS OUR NAME and UNDERSTANDS OUR PLIGHT and that MORE than just being AWARE of our questions and our concerns, the SAME God who demonstrated such grace and patience with his frightened prophet so many years ago NO LESS PROMISES to be there with US and FOR US, both NOW and FOREVERMORE. Amen and amen.