

Sermon for Aug 8 2021

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

1 Kings 19:1-8

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. And the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you." And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

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As a joke, the devil let out a rumor that he was going out of business and so he was selling his tools to whomever would bid the most for them. And so, he opened the doors to his customers and showcased all his tools. There were tables full of shiny new boxes of hate, shelves stocked with gilded jealousy, pallet loads of brand-new fear, deceit, and lots more. But right in the center of the main aisle was a very old, harmless looking and practically worn-out object, beat, battered, and chipped... looking as if it had seen ages of use. But it had the highest price of all.

Somebody asked the devil what was that? And why was such a used piece of junk so expensive?

"Oh, that," answered the devil. "That is discouragement... It happens to be the most expensive tool, because it is the one I use most. It works on people when nothing else will. With it, I can enter slowly in their minds and hearts and nobody notices. And once I'm there and get them discouraged, I can do whatever I want with them. This tool is so worn out because I've been using it since the dawn of humanity and it works with everybody."

"Very few people know this tool belongs to me," he added. "When they get discouraged and lose hope, they think it's 'them.' They blame themselves, or other people or even the world around them. They never think to blame me," laughed the devil. "People hit obstacles in life, they encounter problems, but when they get discouraged, when they lose hope, that's just me doing my job."

Do you know how amazing Elijah is? Probably not. One of the unintended consequences of retooling our lectionary so that we get a better focus on the Law and the Gospel, the Law and the Prophets is that we have lost the Old Testament stories that helped us get to know the PEOPLE, the PLAYERS the CHARACTERS of the Old Testament. Much of our Old Testament lessons are from the prophets. But they are the WORDS of the prophets, more than the deeds. And so, we get to hear the prophecies but without much of the context behind the words.

Elijah plays a role in so many dramatic events. One thing you should know is when his work takes place. Most of it is during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel. Two more wicked rulers, you can hardly find in history. They are just plain BAD, all around.

Ahab was a Hebrew, one of God's people of the tribe of Ephraim. He is not from the House of David but he is an Israelite. And so, at least in theory his God is Yahweh. But in reality... not so much. Ahab wasn't actually very religious at all. His wife was Jezebel. She was from Sidon, a Phoenician, and she was a religious zealot, a priestess, perhaps even more than that. Her god was Baal. And she was fanatical in her worship of him. She didn't mind one bit that she had wide influence over the people of Israel. And it wasn't long before it was "hip to be hep," to be cool, to be popular, and follow the NEW cool kids... and worship at the temple of Baal. No boring commandments to keep. And... well, they had fertility rites to frolic, you can have sexy time any way you like... and so just say "no way" to Yahweh and join in! Again... everything OLD is new again.

Elijah was a defender of the faith, so to speak. He wasn't at all popular with the cool kids... But there were plenty of people in Israel who still knew better than to throw their lot in with Baal. But oddly enough, they kept it a secret. Sound familiar?

Elijah didn't keep quiet. God said to confront Ahab and Jezebel, and so he did. What he did first is to kick the props out from under old Baal. First he broke the bad news that Yahweh would not permit it to rain. Period... hang on, there is a drought ahead, no water, for God knows how long... EVERYONE will suffer because *Ahab* is responsible for leading the people away from the Lord and permitting the worship of Baal.

Who is Baal? Baal is the “god” of rain and thunder. His blessed seed of rain falls into Gia’s fertile earth and, in time, brings forth the birth of fruit and grain. PHOOIE! says Elijah... *God* is the giver of fruit and grain. And to prove it... Baal is going to suffer performance issues... NO RAIN for YOU. And drought troubled the land.

God tells Elijah to get out of Dodge, and away from Ahab and Jezebel for a while. They need to suffer the consequences of their sins. But the drought is large... and even far away Elijah will also feel the effects. God has him camp by a small creek and sends a raven to feed him every day. But eventually the creek runs dry, so God sends Elijah to live with a widow and her son. To paraphrase, he asks her to make him a sandwich, to which she laughs... “With what? All I have left is this mostly empty jar of flour and a mostly empty flask of oil. And with that I plan to make one last sandwich for my son and I and then die of starvation. So have fun with that, Mr. Holy Man.”

“You are quite mistaken, my good woman,” says Elijah. “Go ahead and make me my sandwich as I told you, and then you will see that the jar will not be empty, nor the flask. If you let me stay with you it will never run out until the Lord sends rain upon the land.” What’s she have to lose? And so she does, and it did... Everyone else might be suffering under the drought but the woman and her son, under the protection of the prophet, will get along just fine. That is until her son dies. She blames Elijah, because she figures that God remembered her many sins. And that was because God noticed her, because of Elijah. It’s HIS fault, really. But Elijah prays for the boy and life returns to him. Hence we have the first recorded resurrection from the dead. That’s why Elijah is a big deal... Jesus was the expected Elijah, because Elijah was supposed to return heralding the Messiah. That’s John the Baptist’s role. But even the Pharisees recall this when Jesus cries out on the cross... ELOI! They assume that he’s calling Elis, Elijah...

Later God will send Elijah back to Ahab... And Ahab will ALSO BLAME Elijah for his troubles...

“Ah... so you have returned to us, O TROUBLER OF ISRAEL?”

“Who ME?” asks Elijah. “Not me... that would be YOU. It is on account of YOUR sins, O troubler of Israel, that Israel is troubled... Whatever, it’s your fault; don’t blame me. But YOU... you are STILL unrepentant. You STILL don’t get it. You would let this continue until the region is dead and dry. For the sake of my people and for no other, the rain will return. Since you dance between gods, why don’t we have a contest? If Baal wins, follow Baal... BUT, when Yahweh wins... follow Yahweh.”

And of course the rest of the story... The prophets of Baal build an altar, dance and pray for hours. Elijah taunts them eventually: “Louder, he clearly can’t hear you, either

he's asleep or otherwise occupied... got the phone off the hook?" They cut themselves and add their own blood to the sacrifice... still no good.

Now it's Elijah's turn. With twelve stones for the twelve tribes he builds an altar... the wood, the meat... drowns it in gallons of water. Raises his eyes to heaven... says a simple prayer... O Lord, show time!... and BOOM! Fire from heaven. The prophets of Baal are taken by the faithful and added to their own sacrifice.

The faithless have been punished, the faithful win the day... and all God's people say.... (YAWN).

NO religious renewal, no mass conversions... Just a threat, a serious one... And if you know what I know about Jezebel, I think you would run, too.

But HOW? How does a great prophet like Elijah, a man who has witnessed the mighty works of God first hand... a man who was guided and delivered countless times.... a man who just played a key role in the defeat of Baal... How does such a man hike up his skirts and run?

Living in chronically anxious times has an effect on us. All of us. Even the rock stars. Burn out, boys and girls, is REAL. And the strongest of us can suffer it.

In 1987, 10,000 Maniacs had their first charting song in the U.S. "Like the Weather" was written by lead singer Natalie Merchant and is simply about being in a foul mood on a day when the weather is horrible, and she can't find a good reason to get out of bed.

Do I need someone here to scold me?
Or do I need someone who'll grab and pull me,
out of... four poster... dull torpor... pulling downward.

She's not sure which she needs... a person who will coddle her, or someone who will give her a swift kick in the motivator.

Point is... there is a time when we need a shoulder to cry on and there are times when we need a strong arm to pull us out of our dark space.

My mother? "SNAP out of It!"

I think my wife is probably of the same mind. And in my case, it's probably the most effective.

But what about Elijah? God was gentle with him. Sent an angel to minister to him... WHY? We treat with sympathy those who we sympathize with. I wonder... Does God ever want to quit? It gets to be too much for us; does it ever get to be too much to HIM?

Scripture assures us that we do not have a great high priest who is UNABLE to sympathize with us.... but who "gets us".

Elijah's NOT done... close... but he's got one more inning left before God pulls him out and sends in the relief pitcher... ELISHA. He sustains him for the "long haul" with bread and water; this is not your ordinary meal. Once again... this is survival food. And we have something similar in the Lord's Supper.

Why does that thought comfort me? What's the preaching point? I think it's BREAD of LIFE, the sustaining work of the Lord in our journey. It's reflected in the Epistle reading (Ephesians 4:17-5:2) today...

31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

1Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.