

Summer Series-
“Discovering God’s Presence in the Tough Times- Elijah”
Pastor John Reutter-Harrah
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Let me give you some context for today’s reading. Elijah is a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel. This is after Solomon’s reign when the nation splits into two kingdoms. Ahab is the northern king and he is married to a Phoenician woman named Jezebel, a Baal worshiper. She persuades her husband to not only worship Israel’s God, but to sacrifice to Baal as well, and that includes human sacrifice. This obviously goes against several of the commandments. So Elijah is a northern prophet who takes on the powers of his day, the king and the queen.

In the chapter before this, Elijah says to the people of Israel who are worshipping Baal, How long will you keep limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, then follow him; and if Baal is God, then follow him, but you can’t have it both ways. So Elijah says, Let’s have a contest. And 450 prophets of Baal dance and sing and cut themselves around an altar, and pray that their god would rain down fire on the sacrifice. Nothing happens. When Elijah prays to his God, the sacrifice is consumed with fire from heaven. And when the Israelites see it, they say, OK, the Lord indeed is God.

Elijah then takes it upon himself to kill the 450 prophets of Baal. By the way, God didn’t tell him to do that. That was apparently his idea. I am reminded of the words of Jesus, who said, you’ve heard it said, Love your enemy and hate your neighbor. You remember the stories of what was done. . . .but I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you. (Matthew 5:44). Well, when Ahab tells Jezebel what Elijah has done to her prophets of Baal, she is not pleased, and she sends a messenger to the prophet saying, You’ve got 24 hours to live.

Elijah does what probably you and I would do: he runs for his life. He runs south to Beersheba, and leaves his servant there, and then he goes another day’s journey into the wilderness and sits under a broom tree. He doesn’t know if he’s being followed, but he figures this is it. So rather than have Jezebel kill him, he asks God to take his life. He says, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.”

Have you ever said that- It is enough? Enough sickness, enough mental anguish, enough evil? Black Americans in our nation are saying, It is enough. It is beyond enough. Perhaps this is a turning point in our nation to begin to deal with

America's original sin of slavery and the racism that blights our nation. It is enough...

Elijah falls asleep under the tree, and is awakened by an angel who has prepared dinner for him, a loaf of bread and a jar of water. He eats, and then he falls asleep again, and wakes up to another meal. The angel says, Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.

Two meals- maybe one meal to help him recover from the past, and another meal to strengthen him for the journey ahead. God says to Elijah, I will provide sustenance for healing from the past, and sustenance for the journey ahead. In the wake of protests going on in this country and around the world, one of the tasks for us white folks is look to the past- to learn the history of this nation- the history of slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, the reaction to Brown v. Board of Education, laws that didn't allow black veterans after WW2 to get mortgages for their homes, one more step in aggravating the disparity in wealth between people of color and whites. We need to know the story of boarding schools where Native children were taken from their homes and stripped of their culture. We need to know our history. That is part of our journey in acknowledging and confessing the past.

And God provides resources for Elijah for the future. God says, I need you strengthened for the future, because I want the future different than the present. We are having a conversation about policing in this country, and you may be hearing things that discomfort you. But these protests and animated conversations are providing resources as we move into a future that can be different, a future that we can be make more just all people. God provides resources to help with the past and resources for the journey ahead.

On the strength of that meal, Elijah walks for forty days until he gets to Mt. Horeb, which is Mt. Sinai. He comes to a cave, and he spends the night there.

When he wakes up in the morning, God asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" I wonder how that was inflected- what are YOU doing here, Elijah, my servant, or, what are you doing HERE, Elijah, in this place? Subtext: I helped you win the contest against the prophets of Baal. I just sent an angel to make sure you had enough to eat. I'm on your side. Why do you feel like you have to run? And Elijah basically says, "I did what I thought you asked me to do, and I alone am left, and my enemies are trying to kill me."

Elijah sounds pitiful when he says to God, And I alone am left! But that wasn't true! One chapter before this we learn that there were a hundred prophets still faithful to the God of Israel. Elijah wasn't the only faithful person left, but he can't see beyond himself. All he can hear are the threats of Jezebel. And yet God had given him community. Community can stand up against the powers. Later we will find out there were still 7000 people in Israel who had not turned to Baal. God gives us a community of people to support and hold us accountable and to help make a new future. We are not alone.

So God sends the forces of nature to re-orient his thinking. God sends a wind that is strong enough to break mountains, but God is not in the wind. God sends an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake. God sends a fire, but God is not in the fire.

And then comes the sound of... sheer silence. Elijah wraps himself in his mantle and comes out of the cave. And a voice says to him, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" Again, that question.

And Elijah still says the same thing he said before: I did what you wanted, and now I'm all alone, and they're going to kill me.

So how does God respond? God doesn't say, I'm so glad for your zeal, Elijah. Way to go. God doesn't comfort him with soothing words, and say, I'm so sorry, Elijah, that life has been so rough. God tells him to get back to work. "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus." By the way, he is way south in Beersheba, and he will have to go all the way through Jezebel's territory to get to Damascus. He's telling Elijah, I'm going to give you another chance to not be afraid. "When you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram." By the way, the king of Aram will eventually do harm to Israel.

Then God says, "Also, you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel." Jehu would take Ahab's place. There will be a change in leadership. And here is the third challenging job for Elijah. He is going to find his replacement. "You shall anoint Elisha as prophet in your place."

Elijah is going to be asked to hand the mantle of leadership to someone else. Where are we being called to pass on the mantle of leadership? New leaders are arising- who are the voices we need to be listening to? They can cause us to be uncomfortable, but the Spirit is blowing in new ways. I'm glad that Elijah gets

another chance in this story. God is the God of second chances. But Elijah's time as a prophet will eventually come to an end.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran pastor and public speaker and writer. In a sermon some years back, she was talking about being on a book tour. She was in New Orleans, and seated at dinner next to Paul Young, who is the writer of *The Shack*. She had at one point said some negative things about his writing.

I quote from her sermon: "So yesterday I asked Paul Young, *The Shack* guy, if he'd be willing to share some advice about how to navigate this ride I'm on without falling off of it. And here is where things got uncomfortably Gospel-y. This man looked me straight in the eyes, well, kind of up into my eyes, and said, 'Nadia - you are just participating in something God is doing. God doesn't do things alone and we can't do redemptive things without God. You are already good enough in God's eyes to be participating in this. God's grace is enough for today. It always is enough for one day. 'Do not fear,' this man whose book I had said snarky things about said to me with nothing but love, 'do not live in fear of what is to come because God only exists in reality and the only reality is right now and God's grace is enough for this day. It's all you have.'

God provided what Elijah needed to deal with the past and to be strengthened for the future. I invite us to claim that promise as well. Amen.