

“Strength for the Journey”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-15a

One can make the argument that Elijah, to paraphrase Hillary Clinton’s campaign line, is the most famous person in the Bible we know very little about. Elijah, an Old Testament prophet, resurfaces at some key points in the gospels. “Who do people say that I am?” Jesus asked his disciples. And they responded, “some say Elijah.” (Matt 15:14, Mark 8:28, John 1:21-25). In the story of the Transfiguration, when Jesus goes up on the mountain with two disciples, who appears standing with Jesus in a dazzling light but Moses and Elijah (Matt 17:3, Mark 9:4-5, Luke 9:30-33). And as he is dying on the cross, those standing by hear Jesus cry out, and think he is appealing to Elijah (Matt 27:47-49, Mark 15:35-36). To this day, among Jews, a chair is left open at Passover, in anticipation of the return of Elijah.

Laura and I have been spending some time thinking about possible baby names. Not knowing gender, we have been going over list after list of names for boys and girls. I was surprised to learn that Elijah is the 29th most popular name for boys in America in 2006.¹ The name Elijah, by the way, means “my God is Yahweh.” Elijah, a participant in the key events of Jesus’ life, and a popular boy’s name. But how much did we know about Elijah? And how can these ancient stories of a long-ago prophet help us reclaim our prophetic tradition for today?

A few weeks ago, we heard the story of King Ahab’s encounter with Elijah. The king, like so many kings, surrounded himself with yes-men, people who would only tell him what he wanted to hear. Elijah, bold and brave, was a lone dissenting voice. Elijah saw the problems in Ahab’s reign and announced that a drought would befall Israel as punishment. And the drought set in, a death warrant was placed on Elijah’s head and Elijah went on the run. And when Elijah and King Ahab finally met, Ahab said, “is it you, you troubler of Israel?” (1 Kings 18:17).

Last week we heard the story of King Ahab’s wanting his neighbor Naboth’s vineyard and how Queen Jezebel conspired with the local legal system to have Naboth framed and executed and then stole his land out from under him. And God, speaking through the voice of Elijah, was the only one to protest.

Elijah! “Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel . . . He is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. You shall say to him, “Thus says the Lord: Have you killed, and also taken possession?” You shall say to him, “Thus says the Lord: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.”

Now we meet Elijah at what should be the peak of his success. He has just won a major battle against the prophets of Baal. It is a gory, even problematic story, but you need to know it. The king and queen, Ahab and Jezebel, had been worshipping Baal the Caananite God instead of Yahweh, the God of Israel. And Elijah alone was left alive as a prophet of Yahweh. So Elijah

challenged 450 prophets of Baal to a contest on Mount Carmel. Elijah and the prophets of Baal would each set up a sacrifice, an offering of a bull. Then they would call upon their respective Gods. Whichever God could burn the offering in the shortest time, it would be clear, was the most powerful God. And Elijah let the prophets of Baal go first. So they prayed and prayed – and nothing happened.

As the prayers and litanies of the prophets of Baal pile up, Elijah mocks them, suggesting, among other things, that perhaps Baal can't put in an appearance because he was sleeping, or busy in the bathroom. Then when it is Elijah's turn to offer his sacrifice, first he rebuilds the altar of Yahweh, then soaks his bull with water (making it harder to burn) and boom! Lightning strikes, the offering burns, and all present fall to the ground, crying "Yahweh is the true God." Elijah immediately takes advantage of this unanimity to point his finger at the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, ordering that they be seized and killed.

Which brings us to today. Elijah's triumph over the prophets of Baal has enraged Ahab and Jezebel. Ruthless Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow" (1 Kings 19:2) So Elijah, wanted dead, escapes into the wilderness. And what follows is a deep, rich passage full of theological twists and turns.

One can spend a lifetime pondering how God chose to speak to Elijah, not in the loud storms and earthquakes, but in a "still, small voice." Or as the new, better translation has it, "in the sound of sheer silence." This is a passage I wish every teenager growing up in a church knew by heart. For there will be times when it feels like 450 against one, when everyone else is doing something you think is far from what God wants. To be able to remember to listen for the still, small voice of God and trust it even when your ears are filled with loud, raucous noise urging other actions.

We could explore how this passage relates to our situation when our neighbors come from many different traditions. We can wonder, along with theologian James Alison, if God's silence is meant, as a corrective to Elijah's taunting of the prophets of another religion.²

But for today, I want to explore a different dynamic that this story tells. What happens when the prophet burns out? Elijah, on the run from Ahab and Jezebel again, should be elated by his victory. But instead, he has had it. He's done. There, in the wilderness, we have the contrast between public national victory and private, personal depression.³ We might have guessed that he would be celebrating, or trying to rain down more fire on Ahab and Jezebel. Instead, Elijah went a day's journey into the wilderness, sat down under a solitary tree and asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life."

And right there, it hits home for some of us. From the outside, to other people, it looks like we have everything together – that success comes easy to us. But on the inside, we know that we are a mess – tormented by inner demons and face to face with depression. There are some here today who, with Elijah, have said "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life" (1 Kings 19:4). Depression can be a deadly disease, and we as a community of faith must do all that we can to support those caught up in it's grasp.

But here, for Elijah, I think it is about more than just personal depression. In Elijah, we encounter a disease particularly relevant to prophets and all who work for social justice: burnout. It is exhausting to feel alone and isolated as you do the work you believe God is calling you to do. It is exhausting to battle the principalities and powers alone, lined up against the well-financed prophets of Baal. It is exhausting to speak and act with integrity and realize that the opinions of the people are fickle – swinging from worshipping Baal as God at one moment and then crying “Yahweh is God” the next. It is enough for the prophet to want God to give up on the people and the entire situation.

And in the midst of depression, burnout and utter physical exhaustion, Elijah is not a pretty sight. It is one of the most common, and least attractive traits of any prophet – self-pity. Sitting alone under a tree complaining. Hiding out in a cave, more comfortable in the dark dank cave than under the sun. At this moment in Elijah’s life we see most vividly the interplay between human despair and God’s call.

As I was first beginning work on this passage a month ago, I read a similar sad story of a prophetic burnout. A mother of a U.S. soldier killed in Iraq decided that she needed to speak out against the war. And somewhat surprisingly, back when this long war was still very popular, she became the face and voice of the beginnings of a peace movement. Her name, you might have guessed, is Cindy Sheehan. Over Memorial Day weekend, she wrote what she called a “resignation letter as the “face” of the American anti-war movement.” For one moment, set aside any your thoughts and beliefs about policy and listen to her pain.

I have invested everything I have into trying to bring peace with justice to a country that wants neither. If an individual wants both, then normally he/she is not willing to do more than walk in a protest march or sit behind his/her computer criticizing others. I have spent every available cent I got from the money a "grateful" country gave me when they killed my son and every penny that I have received in speaking or book fees since then. I have sacrificed a 29 year marriage and have traveled for extended periods of time away from Casey’s brother and sisters and my health has suffered and my hospital bills from last summer (when I almost died) are in collection because I have used all my energy trying to stop this country from slaughtering innocent human beings. I have been called every despicable name that small minds can think of and have had my life threatened many times.⁴

The pain of a prophet in burnout. It is a sad story that happens all too often. Margaret Mead once wrote, “never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.” But sometimes, prophetic leaders feel like they have been abandoned even by their small group of supporters and they burn out. Prophetic fire and passion changes into pain and begins to sound self-righteousness.

Even for a figure as bright as Elijah, who seemed to glow with the power of Yahweh, the sense of call would grow dim and depression and self-pity and despair set in. If nothing else, this story serves as a warning to us. It shows the drawbacks of a lone-ranger approach to working for change.

God's therapy for Elijah's burnout may not have been what Elijah wanted. God does not say to Elijah that he's done great work and now it is someone else's turn to carry the ball. God doesn't tell him to go take a nice two week Mediterranean cruise to forget it all. But there is an abiding concern and care for Elijah. Twice an angel appears and puts food in front of him and tells him to "get up and eat." That he needs his strength for the journey, and whether he has an appetite or not, the cake baked on hot stones and the jar of water will do him good.

God refuses to accept Elijah's resignation as prophet. Instead, God puts him back to work, giving him even more to do. That will be enough. That, and a display of God's presence in a sound of sheer silence. Biblical scholar Richard Nelson ends his commentary on this passage with these words.

God's therapy for prophetic burnout includes both the assignment of new tasks and the certain promise of a future that transcends the prophet's own success or lack of it. In the light of such a future, life is worth living after all. And for the present there are tasks to be done, away from the womb-like security of a cave at Horeb, tasks that demand of us journeys deep into the wilderness.⁵

Sometimes it happens at church. People burn out – the important work they have done that combined their passion with a great need begins to leave a bitter taste. Progress seems too slow and the future feels far off. Sometimes it happens when your work suddenly feels less like a meaningful career and more like a job. Sometimes it happens as you think about the future of your neighborhood, or city, or country.

So, for the prophets and faithful here, what do you do when your friends and supporters fade away and it is just you in the wilderness? This story offers a cue: eat the food set in front of you. Stay in the shade. And finally, open your ears for the voice of God. God's voice may not come in the sound of a storm, or in chaos. You may need to keep listening intently, waiting, and perhaps God's voice will come finally in the sound of sheer silence. And then be ready to be recharged. God may not be done with you yet. Amen.

¹ According to the U.S. Social Security Administration. See www.babynamesworld.com site for rankings.

² See my sermon "Harmony or Conformity: Drumbeats and God" preached at Central on 4 March, 2007, <http://www.cpcstpaul.org/sermons/2007/030407.pdf>. In that sermon, I draw on the work of James Alison in his work *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York, Crossroads Publishing, 2001) 25-35.

³ Richard Nelson, *First and Second Kings* in the Interpretation Bible Commentary series (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1987) 128.

⁴ Cindy Sheehan, "Good Riddance Attention Whore," in a diary published on www.dailykos.com on 28 May, 2007.

⁵ Nelson, 129.