

Easter is over. Pentecost and Trinity Sunday have come and gone. And now we begin the long green season after Pentecost. After special seasons of celebration, we now enter what is called "ordinary time" from now until Advent begins in December.

And for the next 5 ½ months, our Old Testament lessons will be focusing on the prophets. I will undoubtedly be preaching about the prophets quite a bit this summer and fall. Today we heard about the quintessential Jewish prophet, Elijah.

Elijah was continually called to deliver tough messages to the king and queen of his day: Ahab and Jezebel. Ahab was the king over the northern 10 tribes of Israel. Yet he was not very faithful to the God of Israel.

To make matters worse, he married a very strong-willed foreign princess: Jezebel. And Jezebel was a fanatic about following her gods, especially the god Ba'al, usually pronounced "Baal" in English. As you might imagine, Jezebel's unswerving loyalty to Baal put her in conflict with the prophets of Israel, most especially the Prophet Elijah.

What comes to pass is a rather epic conflict between Prophet Elijah and Queen Jezebel. And even their names point to their differences. "Jezebel" can be translated, "Baal is Lord." And "Elijah" means, "Yahweh is God."

In fact, our Old Testament lesson today begins right in the middle of their conflict with Jezebel enraged and saying she's going to have Elijah killed within the next 24 hours.

Why is Jezebel so mad?

Well we have to back up just a bit. Our lesson follows on the heels of an epic confrontation between Elijah and 450 prophets of Baal. They have a contest to determine which God is the real God. Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal set up two altars with firewood and sacrifices on top. And then they're going to try call down fire from heaven and see which God will light the fire miraculously.

The 450 prophets of Baal go first. And they pray, and they call upon their god. But nothing happens. They even start slashing themselves to draw blood as an offering. But nothing happens. And Elijah taunts them mercilessly. He says things like: "Shout louder—maybe your god is asleep—or maybe he's using the restroom."¹

They shout louder, all day long, but nothing happens.

Then it's Elijah's turn. And he has his altar doused with water until it's soaking wet. Nevertheless, when Elijah prays to God, God sends fire from heaven that not only lights the wet wood, but also evaporates all the water puddled up around the altar. And then the people seize and kill all 450 prophets of Baal, since they are obviously false prophets.

¹ 1Kings 18:27

This is where our lesson picks up today. Queen Jezebel is livid that her prophets have been killed. So, she swears she will have Elijah killed within the next 24 hours.

Elijah goes from triumph to terror. He flees. Elijah not only leaves his country. Then he goes all the way across the next country to its opposite border. He's really running.

And Elijah leaves his servant in a border town called Beersheba. This servant would be his protégé, his heir apparent. Leaving the servant behind is a sign that Elijah is giving up his vocation as prophet. He's not only running for his life. He's running away from his ministry. He heads even further south out into the desert. He plops down under a shrub and says, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life."²

It's quite the irony. Elijah is running for his life, yet he's so depressed he wants God to kill him. This is a man who is fearful and frazzled and fried. So, what happens? Does God grant him his wish? Does God send down fire from heaven to consume him? No.

God sends an angel with bread and water. And the angel says, "Get up and eat, otherwise the *journey* will be too much for you."³ This Hebrew word translated as journey has richer connotations. It means not only a physical, geographical journey between two points. It also means a journey through life. A mission. A vocation. A way of life. "Get up and eat, otherwise the *way* will be too much for you."

And this is an important reminder for us. It's the first great lesson here. It's about sources of power. Are you relying upon your own internal sources of power? Or are you relying upon God to power and equip you? The spiritual reality is, if you're trying to accomplish your mission on your own, if you're relying on your own strength, then you're going to be overwhelmed. If you're relying on yourself, the way is eventually going to be too much for you. Instead, God is saying, 'eat and drink what I provide. Take what I give to get you through the journey. Rely upon my power, and not your own.'

So, Elijah eats and drinks. It revives him, at least physically. We're told that he goes "in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God."⁴ You probably know Mt. Horeb by its other name: Mt. Sinai. The mountain where centuries before God spoke to Moses. Even if you haven't read Exodus, you know what happened from the movies. Sinai is the mountain where God appeared to Moses in the midst of storm and thunder and earthquake.

And when Elijah is on the mountain, there are all of these manifestations reminiscent of the days of Moses. There is a loud and terrific windstorm that breaks rocks. There is a tremendous earthquake. There is fire. But unlike Exodus we're told very clearly, God was not in the wind. God was not in the earthquake. God was not in the fire.

² 1Kings 19:4

³ 1Kings 19:7

⁴ 1Kings 19:8

And then, after these events, there is 'a sound of sheer silence.' Sometimes it's translated as 'a still, small voice.' What a wonderfully poetic phrase. A sound of sheer silence. And when Elijah hears this sound of sheer silence, he wraps his face in his cloak. In other words, he recognizes God's presence in this stillness.

Elijah has been through storminess in his life. But he finds that God is present in sheer silence.

And that's also important for us. It's the second great lesson here. Presence. God is present. God is here. In the midst of the turbulence of life it may be hard to detect that presence. It may require tuning out the storms and the fires and the earthquakes, in order to listen for that still, small voice, that sound of sheer silence. But God is here. Sometimes God is present in very public and flashy ways. But much more often in life, God's presence is known in very quiet and subtle ways. And his presence, his quiet, his calmness are there to absorb your storminess. Bring your storminess into God's presence. He can take it. And he can bring you calm.

That's what Elijah does. He goes out into God's presence. And there he makes his complaint to God. He brings his stormy emotions into God's calm presence. He says, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."⁵

It's a rather pathetic, pouty, and paranoid statement. Listen to the subtext. 'God, I'm the only one who's following you. Everyone else in Israel has abandoned you. I'm the only friend you've got left. And things aren't going well for me. In fact, everyone in Israel's out to get me.'

It's mostly untrue. Elijah is being self-centered. He's blowing everything out of proportion. And God calls him on it. God is loving, but firm. And God corrects Elijah's false assumptions.

First, God calls him to return to his ministry. "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus."⁶ Again the same word is used here that was used earlier.

In the desert, Elijah was told, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey (the way) will be too much for you." Now, at Mt. Sinai, God is saying, "Go, return on your way (return to your prophetic ministry)." 'Go back,' God is saying, 'but do it in my strength, not your own. I've fed you. I've sustained you. You've encountered my presence. Now, stop feeling sorry for yourself and get back to work.'

And then God lays out some specific instructions. Our reading ends at this point.

But in subsequent verses, God lays out further instructions: anoint Hazael as the Syrian king; anoint Jehu as king over Israel to replace the wicked King Ahab; anoint Elisha to be

⁵ 1Kings 19:14

⁶ 1Kings 19:15

your successor. The amazing thing is, Elijah will only accomplish one of those three tasks. He will anoint Elisha. And it will be Elisha's task after Elijah is gone to anoint the other two.

Then God makes a wonderful statement: "I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."⁷ God is saying, 'You think you're the only one who's doing God's will? Well, you're not. I have 7,000 faithful followers in Israel.'

God's message is clear. 'Elijah, you're not the only one left. You're not alone. And I'm still in control.'

And this is the third great lesson. Perspective. Elijah is pouty and pathetic and paranoid. But God offers him true perspective. You're not alone. You don't have to do everything. There are others who will share this ministry with you. There are others who will come after you to complete the work of the kingdom after you're gone. So stop feeling sorry for yourself. Stop thinking that you have to do it all. Just get back to work with the piece of God's mission that you've been given. Look at your life, and look at your ministry from God's perspective, not your own.

And so Elijah goes forth. Elijah had earlier abandoned his protégé and his ministry. He was ready to abandon his life. He felt sorry for himself and claimed that he was God's only faithful follower. But God sets Elijah straight. God gives him his power, and presence, and perspective. And then God sends Elijah back to reclaim his mission and ministry. Elijah was burned out and ready to chuck it all. But in the end, he resumes his ministry and begins again to carry out God's work.

Like Elijah, all of us ride an emotional roller coaster. Sometimes things are going great and we feel wonderful. Sometimes, things are tough and we're dejected. But God calls us to faithfulness whether we're up or down. God calls us to follow him whether we're happy or depressed.

However, God also promises several things. God knows that the way is too hard for us alone. We cannot follow him in our own strength. And so he empowers us. He feeds us with his Body and Blood. And he assures us of his presence, in good times and bad. Whether we're up or down, his presence is there. And none of us are expected to do it all. We just have to do our part. And we have to keep that in perspective.

God is telling us, be strengthened at my table. Be calmed by my presence. And keep looking at things from my perspective. And go on your way. Go out to continue your part of the mission.

Make disciples. Baptize and teach. Care for the suffering. Carry my love out into this broken and hurting world.

⁷ 1Kings 19:18

And in the midst of the stress, in the midst of fire and wind and earthquake, look for me. Listen for my voice. For I am with you. And I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.