

What can we learn from Elijah

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab
4th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 7, Year C. (Text: 1 Kings 19:1-18)*

Once upon a time the Devil took out an ad in the newspapers announcing that he was putting all his tools up for sale. They would all be laid out for public inspection in his workshop, with the asking price clearly marked on each one. People who went to the Devil's sale could see that most of his tools were very sharp and dangerous – hatred, envy, lying, addictions, lust, murder, and the like. On a separate table from the others lay a simple hammer that looked relatively harmless, but was marked with the highest price of all. The Devil wanted at least twice as much for it as for any of the other tools that looked more effective. Somebody asked, "Why is that one priced so high? It doesn't look special." The Devil answered, "Oh, but it is. That's my hammer of DISCOURAGEMENT. It's beaten up and worn because I've used it so much. And it's got a higher price than the rest because it's so valuable to me. It's more useful than all the others put together." Then the Devil gave a wicked grin. "I can break a heart faster with discouragement than with any other tool I use."

The Old Testament lesson today is a story about the discouragement that once pounded a man who was a true hero of God, the Prophet Elijah. And that discouragement came on the heels of Elijah's greatest triumph. The chapter which comes right before the passage we just heard tells about Elijah's moment of glory. Here are the highlights of it, in case you may have forgotten.. It all happened about 860 years before Christ, after the kingdom of David and Solomon had been divided into two parts, and the northern part was ruled by a king named Ahab whose wife was a Sidonian princess called Jezebel. Most of you have probably heard of her. She seduced the people of Israel into abandoning God and worshiping the idols of Sidon: the storm-god Ba'al and the mother-goddess Asherah.

To punish Israel for their apostasy, the LORD sent a famine and a drought on the land for three years. Then He told Elijah to go to Ahab and call for a face-off between Himself and Ba'al on the summit of Mount Carmel, a test meant to prove which of the two was *really* God. Only Elijah was there to speak for the LORD, but there were 450 prophets of Ba'al. This was to be the test: the one who answered his worshipers' prayers with fire sent down from heaven was the true God.

An altar was set up for Ba'al, and his 450 prophets danced around it from dawn until late afternoon, even gashing themselves with knives to offer their own blood, but no fire fell from heaven on their sacrificial bull. Then it was Elijah's turn. He personally rebuilt the ancient altar of the LORD that had been pulled down, sacrificed a bull on it, and had workmen dig a trench around it. Then he told them to soak everything with water – the altar, the bull, even the surrounding ground. They poured water on until it ran down the mountain like a river. Then Elijah prayed to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Almighty sent a bolt of fire from heaven that instantly consumed not just the sacrifice, but the altar and all of the water as well. It was very impressive to the crowd. They shouted, "*The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!*"

Elijah said, "*Grab those prophets of Ba'al, and don't let even one of them get away!*" Then he took them down into a nearby ravine and personally slaughtered them all. It was a classic, gory Old Testament scene: the glory of the LORD was vindicated and bitter punishment fell on the idolaters. Afterwards, Elijah announced that the drought had ended and rain was on the way. Then, as if he hadn't already put in a full day, he took off running ahead of Ahab's chariot all the way back to the gate of Jezreel, seventeen miles way. That Elijah was a stud, wasn't he? Quite the man. A real hero!

Elijah must have felt on top of the world. He was the victor. The LORD whom he served had proven Himself to be the One True God, exactly as Elijah had been sure He would. The common people seemed converted. Ba'al was obviously nothing but a lifeless idol. The prophet probably thought, "Now everyone will return to the LORD!" But just turn the page of the Bible and we come to the part we heard this morning, where Ahab tells his wife about the massacre of her prophets, and the evil queen sends this message to Elijah: "*Thus 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.*" Or, in simpler words: "Elijah, you're dead meat!"

All it took was this threat, and *discouragement* immediately overcame Elijah. It knocked him out with one blow. The man who had stood all alone before a hostile mob with only his faith to protect him was suddenly terrified. His faith melted. His confidence dissolved. His heart was broken. And he decided to run for his life.

Has there ever been a time when you felt as Elijah did —as if you'd been dragged off the mountain top and pushed into the abyss in a heartbeat? It happens to everybody at least once. On the heels of what feels like our greatest achievement — or even our moment closest to God — we find ourselves plunged into despair and discouragement. So we decide to escape it by running away, away from what God himself has called us to *do* and to *be*, because — now — being and doing what God requires no longer seems possible.

As Elijah departed the land of Israel, heading south, he was fleeing both from Jezebel and from his vocation as a prophet. But as things turned out, this hasty journey took him to a deeper awareness of God's will and a more profound appreciation of God's ways.

In his discouragement, Elijah saw fleeing to Horeb, the Mount of God, as a way to escape a bloody death at the hands of Jezebel — even as he prayed for a merciful death at the hands of God. Running away was a deliberate act of disobedience. It was a gesture of *non-faith*. Even so, God sent angels to sustain the broken-hearted prophet — angels with bread from heaven to keep him alive so that he might finally discover his destiny.

Once Elijah arrived at Horeb (which is just another name for Sinai), God spoke to him twice, both times asking the same question: "*What are you doing here, Elijah?*" Did I send you *here*? Is your work *here*? Do you think you'll understand Me better *here* than you will back home in Israel where I first found you, called you, blessed you, and sent you to do My will? Tell Me, "*What are you doing here, Elijah?*"

Elijah evaded the Lord's question altogether, and instead offered a whiny, self-righteous declaration that was in fact only partly true. I can think of times I've done that when I was talking with the Lord. Haven't you? (How did we imagine that God would accept our "edited" version of the facts?) Anyone who's read the earlier part the Elijah story is aware that there were *other* prophets in Israel who had been protected from Jezebel's wrath, and there were *other* Israelites who still kept faith in the God of Abraham and refused to bow down to Ba'al. Elijah *was* a real hero, but not the *only* hero.

Compare the prophet's behavior with our own tendencies. We're never more likely to find ourselves alone and self-justifying than when we've run away from the work God has set before us. In discouragement, we rationalize our choices. Depressed, we try to persuade ourselves and the world

and even God that it's really more "healthy" ("healthy" is a popular buzzword these days) for us to *abandon* our task than it would be to stick with it, to continue day after day doing what we've come to think is too discouraging, demeaning, or burdensome for us to endure any longer.

I found this great line in my reading this week: "*God is not easily summoned to be with us in our 'caves of avoidance.'*" God showed Elijah tokens of God's awesome power – rock-splitting wind, a consuming fire, and a mighty earthquake – just as he had shown Moses in the same place an age before. But this time God was not *in* the wind, or the fire, or the earthquake. Instead, when the loud roaring, hissing, and crashing had died away, and the only sound was no sound at all, God finally spoke to his prophet. And He spoke, not to recommend that Elijah have some esteem for silence, but rather to tell him that it was now time for him to be obedient, take action, and return to his duty instead of indulging in self-pity. He still had work for Elijah to do, in the name and power of the God of Abraham, and He wanted Elijah to go home and get busy.

So, what can you and I learn from Elijah? What lessons can we take away from the story of a hero prophet's discouragement and flight from responsibility? We learn this: that neither the experience of dramatic signs, nor the knowledge of God's quiet presence, is sufficient *by itself* to lift us out of our chosen pit of discouragement. Climbing out of the dark abyss of despair into the light of hope requires us to stop running away and return to the task God has set before us. The feeling of discouragement can truly break our heart. But discouragement is an emotion, and we can't control emotions. We *can* decide, however – in spite of feeling discouraged – to remain obedient. And it's through *taking action* that our life and our faith – and finally even our emotions, too – will be renewed. The lesson we learn from Elijah is to have patience and wait to see what God will do, for our God is faithful and his power to save is perfect.

Hear again these verses from the psalm we read earlier:

Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? and why are you so disquieted within me?

Put your trust in God; for I will yet give thanks to him, who is the help of my countenance, and my God.