

"Elijah's No Good, Very Bad Day"  
 1 Kings 19:1-19  
 August 8, 2021  
 York Center Church of the Brethren  
 Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Elijah must have been feeling pretty good. In chapter 18 of 1 Kings, we find him confronting King Ahab and his wife Queen Jezebel with their lack of obedience to God and their worship of the false god, Baal. The king calls the prophet, "an old troublemaker." Elijah challenges the people with these words, "How long are you going to sit on the fence? If God is the real God, follow God; if it's Baal, follow him. But make up your minds!"

Elijah challenges the 900 prophets of Baal to a sacrificial duel. They were told to set out a sacrifice and then wait for their god to respond. They waited so long that at one point Elijah taunted them and said, "Where oh where is your god? Maybe, Baal is in the bathroom or maybe he overslept." Of course, because Baal didn't exist, there was no response to their offering.

Then it was Elijah's turn. He set out a sacrifice for God and God responded immediately with fire that consumed the sacrifice and everything around it. All the people fell to the ground to worship God.

Elijah ordered them to grab the false prophets and kill them. So, Elijah must have been feeling pretty good about his work as a prophet. He had proven once again, that the God of creation was the one true God. We pick up the story in chapter 19 from The Message.

*Ahab reported to Jezebel everything that Elijah had done, including the massacre of the prophets. Jezebel immediately sent a messenger to Elijah with her threat: "The gods will get you for this and I'll get even with you! By this time tomorrow you'll be as dead as any one of those prophets." When Elijah saw how things were, he ran for dear life one hundred miles to Beersheba, far in the south of Judah. He left his young servant there and then went on into the desert another day's journey. He came to a lone broom bush and collapsed in its shade, wanting in the worst way to be done with it all—to just die: "Enough of this, GOD! Take my life—I'm ready to join my ancestors in the grave!" Exhausted, he fell asleep under the lone broom bush.*

*Suddenly an angel shook him awake and said, "Get up and eat!" He looked around and, to his surprise, right by his head were a loaf of bread baked on some coals and a jug of water. He ate the meal and went back to sleep. The angel of God came back, shook him awake again, and said, "Get up and eat some more—you've got a long journey ahead of you."*

*He got up, ate and drank his fill, and set out. Nourished by that meal, he walked forty days and nights, all the way to the mountain of God, to Horeb. When he got there, he crawled into a cave and went to sleep.*

*Then the word of GOD came to him: "So Elijah, what are you doing here?"*

*"I've been working my heart out for you" said Elijah. "The people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed the places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me."*

*Then he was told, "Go, stand on the mountain at attention before GOD. GOD will pass by." A hurricane wind ripped through the mountains and shattered the rocks before GOD, but GOD wasn't to be found in the wind; after the wind an earthquake, but GOD wasn't in the earthquake; and after the earthquake fire, but GOD wasn't in the fire; and after the fire the sound of sheer silence.*

*When Elijah heard the silence, he muffled his face with his great cloak, went to the mouth of the cave, and stood there. A quiet voice asked, "So Elijah, now tell me, what are you doing here?"*

*Elijah said it again, "I've been working my heart out for YOU, because the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed your places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me."*

*GOD said, "Go back the way you came through the desert to Damascus. When you get there anoint Hazael; make him king over Aram. Then anoint Jehu son of Nimshi; make him king over Israel. Finally, anoint Elisha, son of Shaphat*

*to succeed you as prophet. Meanwhile, I'm preserving for myself seven thousand souls: the knees that haven't bowed to the god Baal, the mouths that haven't kissed his image."*

*Elijah went straight out and found Elisha son of Shaphat in a field where there were twelve pairs of yoked oxen at work plowing; Elisha was in charge of the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak over him.*

(1 Kings 19:1-19- THE MESSAGE)

It's a wonder Elijah didn't have emotional whiplash! What a day- what a series of days. I think Elijah suffered from what poets call, "the dark night of the soul." He had a great victory for God. He and God were a team. There wasn't anything they couldn't do. But then came the death threat, a bounty on his head, and he ran away in fear.

What we see in this chapter is a full-blown prophetic identity crisis. He sat down under a scraggly shrub and had himself what my grandmother would have called "a pity party." He is a disappointed, despairing, burned-out, broken man. He even asks God to take his life- even as he has fled from Jezebel's death threat.

God allows him to wallow in his self-pity for a while. After all, we all need to wallow now and then. He finally takes a nap and is awakened by an angel of God who brings him food. He eats, takes another nap, and is once again awakened by the angel. He eats again,

and finally has enough strength to travel, which he does, for forty days and forty nights, into the wilderness.

The geographical setting of this story is important because Elijah is traveling in the wilderness and ends up at Mount Horeb, also called Mount Sinai. Sound familiar? This is the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God. Elijah follows in the footsteps of his ancestor, Moses. He climbs up the mountain and hides himself away in a cave.

When God shows up and asks him what he is doing, the bruised prophet responds with words of self-defense and self-pity. "I do and do and do for you, and this is the thanks I get? A price on my head! It's just not fair! I have had it. I did it your way and look what happened. I am the only one left."

God tells him to wait, for God is about to pass by. Elijah is awaiting a "theophany," when God is made manifest to human beings. First a hurricane hits the mountain, crumbling great boulders into gravel. But God was not in the great wind. Next comes an earthquake that shakes the very foundations of the mountain. But again, God was not in the earthquake.

After the earthquake comes a blazing inferno. And once again God was not in the fire. After all of these awesome, noisy, and dangerous acts of nature there comes the sound of sheer, complete silence. God is in the silence. The sound of silence is what draws the depressed prophet from the safety of the cave. He wraps his coat around his face and steps out.

Elijah hears the voice of God, asking him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And even after all that has just happened, the wind, the earthquake, the fire, the silence and the voice of God, Elijah repeats exactly what he said earlier. "I do and do and do for you, and this is the thanks I get? A price on my head! It's just not fair! I have had it. I did it your way and look what happened. I am the only one left."

With profound insight the narrator of this passage portrays the doubt that shadows faith. Even the great prophet of God wonders how God can really be in charge when evil runs rampant on the earth. Elijah is exhausted, running for his life, and wishing to die because he thinks he has been unsuccessful in crushing the power of tyranny and idolatry. He thinks his work has been for nothing. But what the prophet forgot, and what we often forget, is that it isn't about Elijah and his success; it isn't about us or our success. It's about God.

Just like Elijah hiding in his cave, God meets us in our frustration and loneliness to feed and commission us. Probably most of us have known isolation and despair. We have known the great suffocation of depression and the desire to just give up. Chances are we have known fear and its paralyzing hold on us. The times we are living in right now may have brought us to the edge of despair more than once. Just like Elijah, God refuses to leave us alone. God ministers to us with compassion and gives us the sustenance we need for the journey.

Elijah's story, like ours, is a miracle story. It affirms that in his darkest hour God did not desert him. God gave him strength for a long journey that would lead to a new and

keener sense of God's grace and power. The prophet had had it. He was tired, angry, and afraid. He was burned out. He believed that he had given everything to God and had nothing left.

Sometimes I try to dismiss Elijah as a whiny, self-pitying complainer- but when I look closely, I see that Elijah looks an awful lot like me. And he probably looks a lot like you too. Maybe we know what it feels like to give everything we have for God's work and then feel as though we have nothing left and nothing to show for it. Maybe we know what it feels like to fall into the trap of self-pity and decide it is easier to just stay there.

It is really no surprise that during this time of COVID so many doctors, pastors, and teachers are taking early retirement or wishing they could. It is all just too much to bear.

Sometimes we all need a cave in the mountains- a retreat, a place where we can withdraw from the world; a place where we can hide and nurse our wounds. Sometimes we need to run away from all of the responsibilities and stress piled on our fragile shoulders. Sometimes the obstacles and expectations just overwhelm us. We all need time to just whine and complain to God for a bit.

But we must also be willing to go to the entrance of the cave and listen for the silence and then for the voice of God. Who knows how long Elijah would have stayed hidden in his cave if God had not pursued him? God provided for Elijah at his moment of deepest need when angels fed him and told him to rest.

Do you notice how God listens to Elijah's tale of woe and then doesn't offer him pity or even an apology? What God offers the old prophet is a new assignment, new responsibilities. God recommissioned the burned-out prophet and sent him off with a new purpose. God contradicts Elijah's complaint that he is the only faithful person left in the whole nation of Israel by telling him that there are, in fact, 7000 faithful people remaining who have not worshiped the false gods. Among the faithful is Elijah's successor.

God sends the prophet back out into the world with three specific and important jobs. He is to anoint two men to be kings and one man to be a prophet. So, Elijah leaves his cave in the mountain and sets out. Was he happy about it and raring to go? Maybe not, but he went anyway- perhaps renewed by God's trust in him, with a new sense of call and a reminder of God's promise.

There was work to be done and it could not be done in the dark security of the cave. For Elijah, and for us, the call from God may demand that we journey deep into the wilderness and beyond. This call forces us to trust in the God who calls us; to believe in the promise that we will never be abandoned- even if we abandon ourselves.

It is in the worst of our terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days, that we need to hear from God the most and usually want to hear from God the least.

I would guess that we all have moments in our lives that we wonder what God was thinking by calling us to a particular task or place. I am sure we all have moments when we

question and doubt; when we feel angry or resentful; when we feel sorry for ourselves and want to run away. Or is it just me?

Believe it or not, it is in these moments that the call of God will come to us again- and again- and again- until we listen and respond. If you withstand all of the noise and chaos and listen for the sound of sheer silence, there you will hear God. And the voice of God will be calling you, reminding you who you are and whose you are, reminding you of your importance to God and your place in God's world.

Elijah's worth is found in God's love for him and in the call of God upon his life. Your worth is found in God's love for you and in the call of God upon your life.

As we watch the COVID wind rage around us, perhaps we want to stay within the safety of our caves and just wait it out. But you can't always do that. Other people may depend on you. Your church may depend on you.

And if you are wondering about those angels- you know, the ones who woke Elijah and fed him. The ones who told him when it was time to take a nap? If you are wondering where they are- just take a look at the people in that grid of little boxes on your zoom screen. Just look around this sanctuary at the people gathered here with you.

Here are the angels. Here are the people God sends to us to feed us, protect us, love us, and tell us when it is time to just---- rest. The people gathered for worship this morning- these are our angels. These are the people you call when you need help packing moving boxes, when you need meals brought in, when you need a ride to a doctor appointment. These are the people you can lean on when you are grieving a great loss or worried about a deep concern. These are the ones who will celebrate your joys and triumphs.

These are the ones who will go out of their way to help you, to support you, even to challenge you. We live among the angels every single day and yet, we don't always take the time to recognize them for who they really are.

I have seen these angels at work- I have seen **you** at work- caring for each other, feeding each other- body and spirit. I have seen you laughing together and crying over shared sorrows. I have seen you put an arm around a shoulder, offer a smile, and even make a kind comment on social media. I know you send cards and make phone calls. I know you visit people at home and in the hospital.

Elijah didn't know he needed an angel until one showed up and did for him what he couldn't do for himself. That angel sent by God to minister to the great and mighty prophet who was having a no good, very bad day.

That caring ministry allowed him to go on and continue the work of God in that place and time.

And you - the angels among us- you allow us to do the same thing. It is only by the ways in which you care for each other that any of us can continue God's awesome, precious, and heartbreaking work.

This week I want you to pay attention to the angels who care for you. And pay attention to the moments when you are given the blessed task of caring for someone else.

You are a blessing.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.