

## 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – 20 June 2010

Sermon by Rev. Emily Martin

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church

### 1 Kings 19:1-8

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done,  
and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

<sup>2</sup>Then 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.'

<sup>3</sup>Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life,  
and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah;  
he left his servant there.

<sup>4</sup> But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness,  
and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree.  
He asked that he might die: 'It is enough;  
now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.'

<sup>5</sup>Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.

Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.'

<sup>6</sup>He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones,  
and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again.

<sup>7</sup>The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him,  
and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.'

<sup>8</sup>He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food  
for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

## 1 Kings 19:9-18

<sup>9</sup>At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.  
Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

<sup>10</sup>He answered, '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.'

<sup>11</sup>He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord,  
for the Lord is about to pass by.'

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains  
and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind;  
and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake;

<sup>12</sup>and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire;  
and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

<sup>13</sup>When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle  
and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

<sup>14</sup>He answered, '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.'

<sup>15</sup>Then the Lord said to him, 'Go,  
return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus;  
when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.

<sup>16</sup>Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel;  
and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah  
as prophet in your place.

<sup>17</sup>Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill;  
and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill.

<sup>18</sup>Yet I will [provide] seven thousand in Israel,  
all the knees that have not bowed to Baal,  
and every mouth that has not kissed him.'

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. **Thanks be to God.**

Once a year our Presbyterian Calendar announces that it is “Access/Inclusion Sunday,” and the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns lift up a particular group of people that don’t always experience the kind of welcome or care that we strive for in the Church.

Inclusion is not an unfamiliar word to us. We are proud to have gay and lesbian elders and deacons making the most of their gifts for leadership and service. We take pride in the fact that men and women serve. That we are blessed with children and youth who take on leadership roles both in worship and in governance. We enjoy looking around and seeing faces of all colors, bodies of all shapes and sizes. We are working hard to make our church more handicapped accessible.

But I will tell you, when I saw that this year’s theme for Inclusion Sunday was called Wounds of War... I filed it away for a more appropriate occasion, I thought, like Veterans Day.

But Friday it hit me...Elijah was a veteran. He lived his life in enemy territory. And when he got the chance, he reacted like many who live with the constant threat of violence. He made a pre-emptive strike that must have felt like self-defense. He did to others what had been done to his fellow prophets, and what he himself had been threatened with. After all, hadn’t God presented him with the perfect opportunity?

The God of Israel had just defeated the so-called god of fertility, Ba’al, in a kind of divine pre-election debate. The God of Israel completely humiliated the prophets of Ba’al by sending down fire from heaven to consume Elijah’s sacrifice, while their own god could do nothing.

No doubt Elijah saw this moment of weakness as his one and only shot at leveling the playing field. And he took it—he killed all 450 of those enemy prophets before they could do the same to him.

But Elijah's victory is not sweet for long. Right away Jezebel lets him know that he can expect: a swift and equally harsh retaliation—from now on, he is her #1 target.

Elijah went from what must have been quite a high point, to probably the lowest he'd ever been. He goes to a place where no one is likely to find him and lies down. His prayer is for death, which ironically requires no action from God. Elijah's completely drained of energy, of purpose, of confidence, of trust. He is isolated, depressed, and suicidal. Not unlike some of our returning veterans.

According to the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns, “one in five soldiers returning from Iraq or Afghanistan lives with major depression or post-traumatic stress disorder.”<sup>1</sup> Some self-medicate with drugs or alcohol. “And rates of suicide and domestic violence have soared.”<sup>2</sup>

I have been lucky. My daily life is far from a combat zone. But not everyone is shielded from the daily threat of violence. Some serve in the military or as police. Others live in neighborhoods where the sound of gunshots are the norm. My guess is that every week there is someone in our pews who is a survivor of domestic violence or abuse. Every week there may be someone who has reached the end of their rope. I wonder how we can best care for those who, like Elijah, find themselves in the wilderness, haunted by the past or terrified of the future, and feeling completely empty, completely alone.

I thought it might be worth looking at how God does it.

The first thing God does is meet Elijah exactly where he is. Elijah doesn't make the first move here. The Lord does.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Bebe Baldwin, Presbyterians for Disability Concerns, “The Wounds of War: The Church as a Healing Community,” <http://www.pcusa.org/phewa/networks/pdc/access10/wounds-of-war.pdf>, accessed 6/18/2010.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

And for someone who feels completely isolated, that is perhaps the most important thing. God shows up, in the form of a messenger, maybe God's version of a deacon. In the beginning, God's care for Elijah is very basic—company and food. And he lets Elijah rest.

But God does not show up just once. God is persistent. The second time the messenger appears, he says, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

That word, "too much" is the same word that Elijah used earlier when he said, "It is enough." God shows that she has been listening.

But God reframes Elijah's presence in the wilderness as, not the end, but a stop along the way of a much longer journey. The messenger's words to Elijah assume that he still has a purpose and a future.

According to the messenger, though, the journey ahead will not be easy. God does not try to trick Elijah into thinking that it will be. If Elijah does not take care of himself, and take advantage of the resources that God is providing, it will be too much for him. But God's messenger is there with the resources.

God also lets Elijah decide where it is that he wants to go for help. Elijah chooses Mt. Horeb, where God has a history of showing up and giving great revelations to his people.

Perhaps Elijah is hoping that God will give him another set of instructions like the Ten Commandments, something to order his life, something clear and absolute.

Or perhaps this is simply the place he knows to be holy, a place where feels more likely to have an encounter with God.

I had coffee on Friday with Lottie Sneed, an organizer for Build. For her South Africa is that place. My hope is that this sanctuary is of those places too—a safe and holy place, where we come expecting to encounter God, and are not disappointed.

When Elijah arrives at Mount Horeb, he enters his own kind of sanctuary, a cave. He is protected on all sides. After forty days in the open wilderness as a hunted man, this at last is safe space.

When he has rested, the word of the Lord comes to him with a question, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” It’s a question that can be about the past, the present, or the future. It can mean, what brought you to this place? It can also mean, “What is your purpose? What do you hope to find here?” It is what counselors call, an open-ended question. It lets the person who answers decide where he will go and how far.

And for now, Elijah’s story is about his own survival. He leaves out the part where he slaughters 450 prophets. In Elijah’s version of the story, he is being punished for his faithful service. He doesn’t blame God outright, but the question is there lingering in the background.

I wonder if God was tempted to set the record straight. Oh really, God could have said. Who was it exactly that ordered you to slaughter all those prophets? Wasn’t the fire enough proof that I am God?

And if God had said that, my guess is that Elijah would have slammed the doors of communication shut, and gone straight back to that broom tree. But God must have known because she lets Elijah’s story be.

Because maybe that’s the story Elijah needs to tell right now. Maybe for him it is a survival story. Maybe later, Elijah will heal enough to rethink it. Maybe now, he simply needs his basic goodness affirmed.

The voice tells Elijah that the Lord is going to pass by. Elijah must decide whether to meet him and when. While he thinks about it, all kinds of things pass by: a furious, rock-splitting wind, an earthquake, and a fire—all potentially signs of God's presence.

But Elijah already knows that God—the mighty God of fire and rain. My guess is that this is not the God Elijah needs right now. After what he's been through, even if God had been in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, I highly doubt Elijah would have ventured outside the safety of that cave for a chat.

It wasn't until he heard what the NRSV translates as the sound of sheer silence, that Elijah ventures out. I think that many of us have probably experienced silences that meant absence, or fear, or punishment, or even death. And many of us fill our lives with noise and activity because of it.

But I think that this silence is different. I think that the sound Elijah hears is the sound of a pregnant silence. The silence that is filled with expectation for what is to come next. This, to me, is the kind of silence that fits with God's slippery name, "I am who I am," or "I will be who I will be." It's not advice. It's not declaration. It's not chastisement. This is the sound of possibility, the sound of an open ended question. This kind of pregnant silence invites curiosity. It creates space that Elijah is willing to enter, and even then, he is hiding in his mantle.

"Elijah, what are you doing here?" a familiar voice asks him for a second time.

To me, there is both irony and comfort in the fact that after all this build up, Elijah simply hears the same voice that's been talking to him all along, asking him the same question he'd already been asked.

This God of Mt. Horeb is not a different God from the one who has been with him all the way.

But Elijah must have missed the comfort in that, because he tells God the exact same story, the one in which he is all alone, and everyone else is against him.

God does not correct him. But I get the feeling that this is not the last time Elijah is going to hear this question either. In fact, it is the kind of question we should probably ask ourselves from time to time. Just what, exactly, are we doing here?

God resists the temptation to argue with Elijah. But he does change the subject. Instead of focusing on Elijah's past, God focuses on Elijah's future. "Go," the Lord says, "back into the wilderness of Damascus."

Elijah probably thought the wilderness was where he was, there, in the Judean desert. But God sends him into the wilderness of the human world, to be part of unfolding political events in Israel. Kings must be anointed, prophets ordained.

What God communicates clearly to Elijah in this command is that he is still considered capable and worthy of doing this important work. And he will have someone to help him. Unfortunately this is a message that veterans and victims of violence don't always hear.

It pains me, but God is honest about the violence that will continue to plague the land. In a sense that may be of some comfort to Elijah—he is not the first to commit violence and he will not be the last. Everyone around him is caught up in this cycle of retaliation. That doesn't make it right, but neither does the burden lie on Elijah alone.

And without calling Elijah paranoid for thinking that all of the Israelites had turned against him, God speaks of 7,000 who will remain faithful. 7,000 people who can be trusted, and who may need his leadership.

As we continue to care for one another and for everyone who walks through our doors and for those we encounter in the city and in the world who are suffering, I propose we take seriously God's approach to pastoral care for those who have hit rock bottom.

First, show up. Do what you can to provide for people's basic needs. Show up again. Be gentle, yet persistent. Provide companionship and sustenance for the journey. Listen to what the other person is saying. If necessary, repeat it back to them so they know they've been heard.

Be honest about the difficulties that lie ahead; do not try to sugarcoat the truth. Let the other person choose their own safe place. Keep showing up.

Ask open-ended questions. Do not react to their story with judgment or tell them what they should have done or what they should be feeling. Just listen. Hang in there until they feel safe enough to move in your direction. Do not force them. Keep asking open ended questions, but do not try to tell their story for them. Silences are ok.

Help them imagine the future and their place in it. Help them find meaningful work and a sense of how they fit into God's plans for the establishment of justice and the healing of the world.

Help them find companionship. Introduce them to others who may have had similar experiences. Introduce them to others who can be trusted.

As I read through the denomination's packet of resources for churches, provided by experienced pastors, experts, and by veterans themselves, I was amazed to discover that they could have come up with almost the exact same advice by studying the way that God cared for Elijah.

But why should it surprise us that the best care we can give one another is simply to follow in the footsteps of a God cares for us?