

When You Feel No Better Than the Ancestors

The Second Sunday after Pentecost, 23 June 2019

1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a; Psalm 42; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

I admit to sympathizing with Elijah this week.

Our lesson for today left out the first part of his story. In I Kings 18, Elijah was the hero, the golden prophet.

Israel was led at that time by a wicked king, Ahab, and his wicked wife, Jezebel. They kept the nation constantly at war. They led the people to abandon Yahweh and worship the Canaanite god Baal. They persecuted the prophets who opposed them. A severe drought came on the land, and Elijah attributed it to Ahab's evil reign.

So Elijah decided to call them out. You may have heard the story. All by himself, Elijah challenged 450 prophets of Baal to a contest. Each side would take a bull, slaughter it, build an altar, and put the bull on it. Then each side would pray for their god to send fire from heaven to burn up the bull and prove to everyone which God reigned.

The prophets of Baal went first. They prayed and prayed, and nothing happened. Elijah was so bold he taunted and laughed at them. The prophets even cut themselves with swords. Nothing.

Then it was Elijah's turn. Mind you, he was all by himself. No back up. He built an altar and put twelve stones on it, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. He poured four jars of water on the altar three times to make the test harder. He prayed one time. And lo and behold when he prayed, the fire fell from the sky and consumed everything, even the water. He sent the prophets of Baal away and had them killed, which wasn't so nice, but that's what he did. As soon as this challenge was over, the rains poured down and the drought ended.

So he should have felt like he was on top of his game, like God was in heaven and all was right with the world. Instead, Elijah heard that Jezebel was threatening to kill him. And on hearing one report of opposition, in the face of one bit of bad news, Elijah fell apart. *He sat down under a solitary broom tree and asked that he might die.*

Why would he do this? Why would a prophet who had boldly challenged Ahab and Jezebel suddenly melt? I think he suddenly realized that all the good he had done for the Lord had not changed anything. Ahab and Jezebel were still in charge, still threatening God's people.

I sympathized with Elijah this week. A lot of truly wonderful things happened. The soccer camp St. Thomas sponsors at Boxwood Recreation Center was absolutely beautiful. Around 60 to 70 kids came out Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday to learn some skills and work together. We were blessed with great weather – no rain, warm enough to dry the fields each morning but not too warm to play. We had great volunteers – Greg, Lisa, Daniel, Margo, Jennifer, Riley, Annabelle. Four of the five kids from a family who have played with our teams

for years, plus several kids from the neighborhood, worked and helped. The camp provided a safe and productive activity and helped kids learn their skills and gifts, which was great, but the camp also showcased the power of this partnership. St. Thomas did not do this alone. We worked with Columbus Parks & Rec and Boys and Girls Club and neighbors near Boxwood Recreation Center to make it happen. It was beautiful.

Then a very nice group gathered on Wednesday evening at Linwood Cemetery to remember the vision of Georgia Wilkins, one of our founding members. She cared about children and education and the Episcopal Church. It was good to celebrate ways we are living out her vision.

After that several folks met at the Loft for dinner. It happened to be our senior warden's birthday, and we were in her family's restaurant, so we had a little party which was fun. The next day, I went to Stewart Detention Center and El Refugio with interns who are serving at Church of the Common Ground in Atlanta. El Refugio provides support and hospitality for men who are detained at Stewart and for their families. It is a little glimmer of hope in a sad and frustrating system. Church of the Common Ground is a church on the streets in Atlanta, gathering people experiencing homelessness and living on the margins in a community of Bible study and worship and care. Our youth have visited there before. So there were many reasons to be happy and hopeful this week.

But by the end of the week, I found myself weighed down, like Elijah. Other events this week flew at me like Jezebel's threats.

- News that we came within 10 minutes of an air strike on Iran
- Reports of poor living conditions where children are being held at the border
- Another execution in our pro-life state
- Congressional testimony about reparations for slavery, the four-year anniversary of the massacre at Mother Bethel church in Charleston, and the reality that we have so far to go to heal our land

I could go on. For a brief time this week, I had felt like what we are doing as a congregation, what I am doing as a follower of Jesus was making a difference. And then it felt like a small drop in a very big bucket of struggle.

“What is your name?” Jesus asked the demon living in the man at the cemetery. “Legion,” they said. He, too, was overwhelmed.

This is not a request for compliments or reassurance that what I'm doing matters. I share my struggle because I suspect I'm not alone in this feeling. We all feel overwhelmed at times by the challenges in the world around us. The demons of unfairness and inhumanity and violence are real and they are everywhere. What do we do when needs of the world and threats against our personhood overwhelm us?

The first thing Elijah did was get up and eat. It is a reminder to stay nourished in body, mind, and spirit. This was not a snack or a treat. It was sustenance in order to go on. And it didn't take much. A little cake and a little water and Elijah was able to journey in the strength of that food for forty more days. So remember to get up and eat.

Elijah's journey was not a vacation. It was a pilgrimage to Mount Horeb, also thought to be Mount Sinai. This was the mountain where Moses received the law from God. The cave on the mountain may have been where Moses saw the glory of the Lord pass by. Elijah got up from his misery and went to a holy place where he knew God had shown up before.

Friends, this is one of those holy places. When you find yourself feeling overwhelmed by the challenges around us, you need to be here. And others need to be here as well. If you know someone who is feeling overwhelmed like Elijah, offer to journey with them to this holy place.

Once he got there, the Lord asked him a question. “What are you doing here?” This was not an accusation. It was an invitation to remember his purpose, the big picture, and not get bogged down in the troubles of the moment. In his response, Elijah complained about how he was being treated, but he also remembered what he was in fact doing here. He zealously wanted Israel to return to their covenant with the Lord. That was what he was fighting for.

So the Lord told him to step outside. Wind, earthquake, and fire all passed by, but the Lord was not in any of those. The Lord was in the sound of sheer silence. When Elijah got still enough, he knew God was with him. He was sent from that place to Damascus. Along the way he met Elisha who became his helper and successor. Because of this moment in the cave, Elijah knew he was not alone.

Elijah is like so many of us. We care passionately to see God’s will be done in our world. At times we feel overwhelmed and alone in the struggle. We wonder if what we are doing makes any difference. And then we come here. We take a little bread and a little wine. We journey in that strength. We remember why we are here and what we hope. We discover God and others are with us and realize we are not alone.

*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

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Grace Burton-Edwards
St. Thomas Episcopal Church
Columbus, GA 31906
StThomasColumbus.org